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Early Childhood Teachers' Conceptualizations of Learning in Three Different Educational Public-School Settings

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Early Childhood Teachers' Conceptualization of Learning in Three Different Educational Public School Settings

by

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Dedication

This research project is dedicated to my three grown children:

Rachel, Peter, and Anne.

And to my long-time companion, Miss Kitty.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Jennifer Adair who has been a mentor and life-changing influence in my life. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Christopher Brown, Dr. Diane Schallert, Dr. Melissa Wetzel, and Dr. Joan Hughes who were supportive coaches throughout this educational, transformative journey. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues at Child Inc. who have encouraged me to keep the faith when I became a little doubtful. Thank you all for making such a difference in my life.

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Conceptualizations of Learning in Three Different Educational Public-School Settings

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In this era of high stakes testing and accountability, how and what children learn in the early childhood classroom depends ultimately upon what their teachers make available to them (Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky, 1980). What teachers bring to children is thought to be associated with their beliefs about learning, and beliefs have been found to impact teacher behaviors i.e. classroom management, instruction, pedagogical methods, planning, and the students' educational experience (Banu, 2014; Wiebe-Berry, 2006; Gutiervez, 1994; Brophy & Good, 1974; Avgitidou et al 2013). This study explored the links between a teacher's conceptualizations of learning and her classroom practices and interactions with children. This was an ethnographic case study built with grounded theory as a way of interpreting and analyzing data. Three public-school settings located in central Texas were chosen as research sites—a public elementary school, a public charter school, and a Head Start. The participants were four prekindergarten teachers located in central Texas. Teachers' conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and the role of the teacher were extricably intertwined and influenced the types of learning experiences teachers provided to children and the nature of the interactions in the classroom. Teachers' conceptualizations of learning was influenced by their workplace environment and influenced the way in which they responded to the various ecologies present in their educational setting.

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Different Approaches to Learning the Alphabet in Two Prekindergarten

Classrooms

In my role as an early childhood administrator, it has been my responsibility to help early childhood teachers broaden their understanding of child development and implement warm and effective interactions in their classrooms. Because I have held this type of position for over a decade, I have had the opportunity to visit and observe many different early childhood classrooms in various settings. In my journey through these classrooms, I have noticed some similarities among classrooms, but more curiously, vast differences among these classrooms. I have found that one of the more prominent similarities among early childhood classrooms has been how the classroom is physically arranged. The majority of early childhood classrooms have a large carpeted area for group gatherings and low-level furniture pieces that are arranged to create learning centers for children. These learning centers are designed to foster the children's exploration of concepts and materials as well as their social interactions with one another. Another fairly common element I have seen in early childhood classrooms are the walls with educational posters positioned at the young child's eye level so they can process and remember information. These informational posters include developmentally appropriate knowledge such as colors, numbers and shapes, a monthly calendar, a daily weather report, and the letters of the alphabet. I also have noticed that children's artwork was usually displayed somewhere on classroom walls. These

classroom similarities seemed to hold true whether classrooms are situated in the private or public sector. The differences I saw in my visits to classrooms was in *what* children were learning, *how* they were learning, and the nature of the interactions of adults and children. For instance, I saw early childhood educators teach the alphabet in very different ways.

Learning the Alphabet in Ms. Nino's Prekindergarten Classroom

Ms. Nino's prekindergarten classroom was situated in a non-profit setting that was part of a larger organization which was federally funded and served children from low social economic families. The parents did not pay any type of fee to the organization for the educational services provided to them. About half of Ms. Nino's twenty students came from families who primarily spoke Spanish. Ms. Nino was bilingual; however, her teaching assistant was not. Ms. Nino's classroom operated from 7:30am to 2:00pm and children were served a home-cooked breakfast and lunch. Children helped set the table for meals, and helped clean up the table after the meal. Ms. Nino's children smiled often, listened attentively, and moved from activity to activity in a calm manner.

In Ms. Nino's classroom, the alphabet was prominently displayed at the children's eye level on the wall above the large carpeted area. The letters of the alphabet were strung-out in a line along the midline of the wall, and words that began with a certain letter were posted under that particular letter e.g. "Jackie" under the letter, 'J'. As the children gathered on the large carpet and turned their attention to Ms. Nino, she began to point to one letter at a time and she asked the

children to call out the letter after her. After naming each letter in the alphabet, Ms. Nino returned to the letter of the week, 'W', and reviewed how 'W' is formed and the sounds 'W' made. She asked the children to tell her words that began with "W". Ms. Nino pointed to the two words that were posted under the 'W' on the letter wall, and asked children to repeat them with her. She asked the children to point out other items in the classroom that began with the letter 'W'. They responded with words such as window, watermelon, wig etc. Ms. Nino then played the *Alphabet Song* and her children sang and danced to it on the large carpet. Later, when her children moved to centers, an art table had been set up where children could paint the letter 'W' and then hang their letters on the wall as art. Although there were many engaging centers in Ms. Nino's classroom, my searching eyes did not see a writing center. I did know (from previous visits to Ms. Nino's classroom) that her children had journals. The children regularly wrote in their journals—they traced prewritten letters and words in the morning as they waited for breakfast. Ms. Nino was proud that her children were learning the shapes and sounds of the letters of the alphabet. Ms. Nino wanted all her children to be able to write their names and know their letters before they left her to go off to kindergarten.

Learning the Alphabet in Ms. Murphy's Kindergarten Classroom

Ms. Murphy's prekindergarten classroom was situated in a private setting in a home that had been renovated into a childcare facility. The center--located in a central part of the city--had large windows, classrooms that opened to wooden decks, and large trees that provided shade to the playground and the children's play

structure. Parents payed a fee for the educational services the center provided to children. The center provided a weekly, half-day program that operated from 8:30am to 12:30pm. The seventeen children in Ms. Murphy's classroom spoke primarily English and Ms. Murphy did not have a teaching assistant. However, a parent volunteer supported the classroom throughout the day and was responsible for bringing lunch to all of the children. The parent volunteer set the table for lunch and cleaned up the table after lunch. Ms. Murphy's children smiled often, asked a lot of questions throughout the day, and moved easily from one activity to another.

In Ms. Murphy's classroom, there was no letter wall and no alphabet strung out on the wall above the classroom's circle-time area. The only visual representation of the alphabet in the classroom was a small alphabet poster that was positioned at the children's eye level on the wall in the writing center. When Ms. Murphy gathered her children for circle-time, the conversation centered on the children telling stories of birthdays, extra-curricular events, and siblings. I did not witness Ms. Murphy playing the *Alphabet Song*, however, she did play songs that were sung in different languages and required her children to engage in complex body movements. Her children did talk about the alphabet when they were in the writing center. In the writing center, children composed letters intended for friends and family. They looked at the alphabet poster off-and-on as they worked on their letters. When faced with constructing an unfamiliar word, the children asked a friend or called upon Ms. Murphy for help. Ms. Murphy sounded out the word and spelled it slowly so that children could faithfully render it upon the page. When Ms.

Murphy's children completed their letters, they addressed an envelope and placed them in either their own cubby or a friend's cubby--a surprise to be received a little later by a classmate. Ms. Murphy explained to me that children would learn the alphabet when they were ready to do so. In fact, her children had been ready a few months earlier. At that time, they approached Ms. Murphy and expressed a desire to learn the *whole* alphabet. As a group, the children commenced working on a project where they drew each letter on a large piece of paper, created pictures that illustrated the sounds of the letters, and strung the letters and pictures into one long banner. They hung their banner in the hallway where they could see it every day coming-and-going to their classroom. Since the completion of their alphabet project, the children have moved on to composing Happy Spring cards, spontaneously playing with puzzles and games that are alphabet-based, and writing more letters to friends and family in the writing center.

Ponderings on Two Different Prekindergarten Classrooms

The learning interactions between teacher and students in these two prekindergarten classrooms were different. In Ms. Nino's classroom, children learned the alphabet through teacher-directed activity that did not include much room for student spontaneous exploration of the alphabet. Alphabet-learning activities included tracing letters and words, rote recitation of letters, and singing the *Alphabet Song*. The room did not contain a writing center where children could extend their learning and apply their knowledge through the composition of letters and cards. In contrast, Ms. Murphy's children were learning the alphabet through

child-centered activity that allowed for spontaneous exploration and study of the alphabet. Alphabet-learning activities included the creation of a student-made alphabet banner and child-generated writings. In Ms. Murphy's classroom, children were encouraged to problem solve how to learn the alphabet when their desires to learn the alphabet emerged.

The children in these two prekindergarten classrooms had very different experiences learning the alphabet. I wondered why the children's experiences were so dissimilar. I wondered if these two different approaches to learning the alphabet had anything to do with how the teachers *thought* about learning, *how* they thought children learned, and *what* they thought children should learn. In other words, was their thinking about learning associated with how they enacted alphabet-learning in their respective classrooms? I was curious why one teacher seemed to think learning occurred in a certain way (primarily teacher-directed) while the other teacher seemed to think learning occurred in a different way (more child-centered). I wondered what workplace factors might have influenced the teachers' thinking about learning and how they taught the alphabet to children.

Research Questions

My wondering about learning and enactments in the prekindergarten classroom were the impetus for this research study. This study was an exploration of the links between a teacher's conceptualizations of learning and her classroom practices and interactions with children. This study also explored the interface

between a teacher's conceptualizations of learning and the ecologies of her

workplace environment. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do four prekindergarten teachers articulate their conceptualization of
   learning and think about the best educational setting for young children?

2. How do teachers understand the pedagogical ecologies of their educational
   setting, and how does this understanding interface with their
   conceptualizations of learning?

The exploration into these two research questions resulted in teachers articulating

their conceptualization of learning, some surprising aspects embedded in their

conceptualization of learning, and describing to me how they perceived and

understood the pedagogical ecologies of their respective workplace environments.

Definition of Terms

In this research study, I used the following terms to dialogue about teachers'

conceptualizations of learning: *knowledge*, *beliefs*, *learning*, *conceptualization of

learning, teacher-child interactions*, and *practices*.

Knowledge

For the definition of the term, *knowledge*, I borrowed from the work of

Alexander, Schallert, and Hare (1991) who viewed knowledge as a construct that

was built over a lifetime. Knowledge as a construct includes the elements of

information, skills, experiences, beliefs, and memories. I have adopted the definition

by Alexander et al. (1991) because it proposes the idea that knowledge and beliefs

are intertwined. Alexander et al. define knowledge as:

Knowledge refers to an individual's personal stock of information, skills,

experiences, beliefs and memories. It encompasses all that a person knows or

believes to be true, whether or not it is verified as true in some sort of

objective or external way (Alexander, Schallert, and Hare, 1991, p. 317).

In this definition, knowledge includes all a person *believes* to be true. Knowledge

encompasses the individual's acquisition of information, skills, experiences, and

memories. Knowledge is something that is acquired over time.

Beliefs

To define the term, *belief*, I referenced the work of Phyllis Ryan (2000). I

chose her definition because she proposed that beliefs were more than unverified

facts. Ryan (2000) defined beliefs as:

Beliefs are evaluative, not factual and non-consensual. Beliefs are mental

constructs of experience often condensed into schemata. Beliefs are not

measured or observed, but inferred. A belief is an assertion that can persist

even when they no longer accurately represent reality (Ryan, 2000, p. 611).

Beliefs are mental constructs that are evaluative and inferred. Beliefs are not

measureable or observable. Because beliefs are not measurable or observable,

teacher beliefs must be inferred through a teacher's dialogue and behavior. In other

words, the teacher's dialogue and behavior serve as the 'windows' into

understanding her educational belief system (Anderson and Reynolds, 1995; Larson

and Silverman, 2005; Gray, 2001; Cassidy and Lawrence, 2000).

Learning

To define the term, *learning*, I drew upon the work of Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds (2010) who viewed learning as a multidimensional *process* that results in change within an individual. They defined *learning* as:

> *Learning* is a multidimensional process that results in a relatively enduring change in a person or persons, and consequently how that person or persons will perceive the world and reciprocally respond to its affordances physically, psychologically, and socially. The process of learning has as its foundation the systemic, dynamic, and interactive relation between the nature of the learner and the object of the learning as ecologically situated in a given time in place as well as over time (Alexander, Schallert & Reynolds, 2010, p. 186).

For Alexander et al., learning is a process that results in change within a person or persons. Learning affects how a person perceives and responds to the world. It is an interaction between the nature of the learner and the nature of what is to be learned. Learning is not the acquisition of knowledge, but rather the *process* by which one acquires knowledge.

Conceptualization of Learning

To define the phrase, *conceptualization of learning,* I used the work by Vygotsky (1998), the work by Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds (2010), and the work of Alexander, Schallert, and Hare (1991). Vygotsky characterized conceptual thinking as a form of intellectual thinking (p. 56). Alexander et al. (2010)

characterized learning as a *process*. Alexander et al. (1991) described learning as a

process that resulted in the acquisition of knowledge. Drawing upon both these

resources, the term *conceptualization of learning* was defined as:

> A *conceptualization of learning* is the intellectual thinking (Vygotsky, 1998)
>
> about the *process* (Alexander et al. 2010) of learning that leads to the
>
> acquisition of *knowledge* (Alexander et al. 1991).

And without all of the citations:

> A *conceptualization of learning* is the intellectual thinking about the process
>
> of learning that leads to the acquisition of knowledge.

In this study, a teacher's intellectual thinking about learning was referred to as her

'conceptualization of learning'.

Teacher-Child Interactions

To define the term, *teacher-child interactions,* I referenced the work of Hamre

et al. (2012) who included both social interactions and instructional interactions in

their definition. For the purposes of this study, teacher-child interactions were

defined as:

> Teacher-child interactions are the daily back-and-forth exchanges that
>
> teachers and children have with one another throughout each day, including
>
> those that are instructional in nature (p. 89).

In the early childhood classroom, teacher-child interactions are reciprocal actions

that occur between a teacher and her students.

Practices

        To define a teacher's *classroom practices*, I referenced the work of Chaiklin and Lave (1996) who described a teacher's practice in terms of her goals, the activities provided to children, and the historical tradition of her field. For the purposes of this study a teacher's classroom practice was defined as:

        A teacher's classroom practices are the goals, activities, and historical traditions she enacts with her children in her classroom.

In this study, the focus was on the classroom practices of four prekindergarten teachers.

Texas Expectations of Early Childhood Education

        In Texas, the mandates on learning and teaching in the early childhood classroom come from multiple directions. One of the strongest voices for framing early childhood educational practices comes from the National Association for the Education of Young Children or NAEYC. According to the NAEYCE Position Paper on the Education of Young Children (2009), early childhood teachers are expected to follow five components that characterize how learning is to occur, and the absence of any one of those components is thought to negatively affect the development of children and their future lives (Varol, 2013). The NAEYCE position paper describes "developmentally appropriate practices" (DAP) that prekindergarten teachers are expected to follow in the classroom (Brown, 2009). An example of a developmentally appropriate practice would be seeing the young child as an active

participant in the learning process or emphasizing play as a means of learning (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009 in Alanis and Flores, 2013, p.36).

In the State of Texas, the local school districts governed by the state do not necessarily align themselves with the NAEYCE recommendations for how children learn and what children should learn in the early childhood classroom (Brown and Lee, 2012; Brown, 2009). At the state level, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has issued voluntary prekindergarten guidelines that "...align with the curricular expectations outlined in the state's K-12 content standards known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)" (Brown, 2009, p. 206). The general public may not find the TEKS problematic, however, early childhood educators worry that the emphasis the TEKS places on the attainment of academic knowledge displaces the importance of young children building a base of social-emotional skills before engaging in the acquisition of academic content knowledge (Brown, 2009: McDermott et al, 2014; Bodrova and Leong, 2007). This creates a pedagogical dilemma for prekindergarten teachers who find themselves caught between acting upon early childhood conceptualizations of learning i.e. DAP, or meeting state and district conceptualizations of learning that promote the earlier and earlier attainment of academic knowledge (Goldstein, 2008; Graue et al., 2015).

The TEKS are not the only points of pressure that create tensions around learning for early childhood teachers. Fuligni et al. (2009) state:

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the United States is currently situated

within a policy context that is driven primarily by concern about the

declining test scores of U.S. students in elementary and secondary school

(p. 508).

The concern for plummeting test scores has birthed the nation's high-stakes testing

and accountability movement and is the reason for the "push down" of academic

learning into kindergarten and prekindergarten (Moloney, 2010; Brown, 2010;

Goldstein, 2008). The fear is that kindergarten is now more like what first grade

used to be, and prekindergarten is becoming more like what kindergarten used to

be. As teachers are expected to dedicate more time to the pursuit of academic

knowledge, the fear (and reality) is that less of the early childhood school day is

focused on the development of social emotional skills through exploration and play.

This concern is real as the lack of social emotional and self-regulation skills can

threaten young children's potential school success (Fuller et al., 2007; Meltzoff et al.,

2009). The irony here is that with under-developed social emotional and self-

regulation skills, children may not be ready for future high stakes testing thereby

sabotaging the types of scores states and districts seek.

The Push-Pull between Child-Centered Classrooms and Teacher-Directed Classrooms

The educational model from The National Academy of Sciences advocates

that a quality early childhood program provides students with cognitive stimulation,

rich language environments, and the development of social, emotional, and motor

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skills (Eager to Learn, 2000, p.2). The educational model from The National Academy of Sciences is child-centered, constructivist approach where the role of the teacher is to facilitate the child's development (Trepanier-Street et al., 2007). This child-centered, constructivist approach to early childhood education is not an approach held by practioners within the K-12 public sector. Tepanier-Street et al. (2007) state:

> The difference in beliefs between the public and early childhood researchers fall along a child-centered, constructivist versus teacher-centered, skills based divide. In fact, this divide can be found among practitioners as well, with early childhood educators' beliefs and practices being more child-centered that their K-12 colleagues (p.338).

Tepanier-Street et al. have captured the ongoing philosophical debate in the field of early education that depicts quality in the early childhood classroom as either a child-centered, constructivist program or a more teacher-directed, authoritarian program. The push-pull between these two-different educational philosophical approaches to a quality early childhood education is one that many early childhood teachers have to contend with on a daily basis (Brown and Lee, 2012). The pressures of a high-stakes environment, which requires more teacher-driven academic activities, have impacted how early childhood teachers think about learning in their classrooms (Brown and Lee, 2012). Many of today's prekindergarten teachers seek ways of incorporating more teacher-directed academic activities into their traditional child-centered models of early education.

Early childhood teachers are being asked to integrate "pushed-down" academic expectations that challenge the time allocated to developmentally appropriate activities (Brown and Feger, 2010; Baumi, 2016; Brown and Lee, 2012). How teachers make these types of adjustments in their classrooms can differ greatly.

Educational Reforms and Teacher Responses

The present-day accountability movement has had an effect on the nature of early childhood classrooms although prekindergarten is far from the first official testing grade. Brown and Lee (2012) state:

> These reforms shift the measure of student performance from individual children and their personal, developmental, and cultural needs to sets of specific outcomes on standardized achievement tests that all children must meet at various points in the K-12 education system (p. 323).

The nature and context of recent accountability reforms challenge early childhood conceptualizations of learning and the types of activities provided to children in the classroom. Particularly in the public sector, quality early educational experiences are tied into children getting a "leg up" on performing well on forthcoming standardized achievement tests rather than being tied to giving children the time and space to develop individually, culturally, and cognitively. Early childhood teachers who find themselves pressured by pushed-down expectations for more teacher-directed academics in the classroom are challenged to find a way of reconciling competing approaches to learning even as they have little input into educational reforms, and are not necessarily the "go-to" people for policy makers

(Jurow, 2016). Unable to affect the mandates of the high stakes reform movement, teachers may respond to mandated change in different ways. In some instances, teachers may "filter out" (Kagan, 1992) the expectations for teacher-directed academic-oriented activities because they do not align with their child-centered conceptualizations of how young children learn. In other instances, teachers may "filter out" interventions that research has shown to be an effective measure (Wen et al., 2011; Wiebe-Berry, 2006) thereby potentially undermining children's learning.

Although some teachers may engage in "filtering out" reform initiatives that do not align with their conceptualizations of learning, other early childhood teachers seek a middle ground between their child-centered approaches to learning and the push for more teacher-directed, academic learning in the classroom. In a case study of three master pre-kindergarten teachers, Brown and Lee (2012) found teachers working to provide the children with the academic knowledge they needed to be successful in kindergarten by employing practices that attended to the children's cultural and developmental needs (p. 334). These three pre-kindergarten teachers were able to bring academic content to young children without abandoning their early childhood pedagogical practices. Brown and Lee (2012) found that the prekindergarten teachers in their study seemed to possess three helpful "mindsets" to their practices. Each teacher had what was known as a 'pre-k disposition'; was a resilient educator; and had a deep interest in developing their own cultural competency as well as their children's future cultural competency. More specifically,

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a teacher with a pre-k disposition was described as naturally passionate and caring about her practice and children (p.332). A resilient teacher was one who worked through the "personal and professional challenges of teaching in a high-stake education system" (p.335). A culturally competent teacher demonstrated that competence by "recognizing the complexity of the lives of the children they work with as well as providing them space to develop their own personalities" (p.339). In this case study, prekindergarten teachers did not have to completely abandon their child-centered conceptualizations of learning in order to create space for more teacher-directed, academic activities. Other teachers find middle ground by making choices and modifying curriculum.

In a study conducted by Baumi (2016), 15 experienced primary grade teachers who worked with standardized curriculum in an atmosphere of high stakes testing made decisions about how children learn, and with some calculated risk-taking, veered from the structures of their mandated standardized curriculum. Baumi (2016) found that the teachers would adapt, augment, and extend the curriculum by making modifications such as adjusting the pace of lessons, changing the sequence of curriculum topics, and adding or replacing activities. The teachers took risks and stepped away from their mandated structures for very specific reasons. They felt the changes they made allowed them to promote student learning, make strategic use of class time, and fill the gaps they witnessed between the curriculum and achievement tests. In this study, teachers made calculated choices in what information they presented to children based upon their beliefs and

conceptualizations of how young children learn. They worked to reconcile their

mental images of how young children learn with the mandates for learning that

were coming at them from state education reform initiatives. Contemporary

research in the field of early childhood education has more to offer about teachers'

beliefs, conceptualizations of learning, and classroom practices.

A Tenuous Link between Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

A lifetime of dialogue and interactions with others allows teacher thinking to

coalesce and form into a belief system. A teacher's internalized belief system can

influence her personal and professional life (Pajares, 1992; Choy and Oo, 2012). In

exploring how experience influences beliefs, the research on early childhood

teachers' beliefs and practices has primarily focused on measuring teachers'

developmentally appropriate or inappropriate practices in the classroom

(Charlesworth et al., 1991; Dunn and Kontos, 1997). The correlation between

teachers' implementation of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and their

articulated belief in the learning tenants of DAP has been tenuous and inconsistent

(Wen et al., 2011).

For instance, in a study by Wen et al. (2011), early childhood teachers

seemed to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices into their belief

systems to a greater extent than they were actually observed in the classroom (p.

947). Although the associations between beliefs and practices were tenuous, some

correlations between beliefs and practice did emerge. Teachers who provided child-

directed free play, and focused on emergent literacy and language development

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activities, reported beliefs that were more strongly aligned with DAP child-centered practices. In contrast, teachers who engaged in consistent routines, had highly organized classrooms, employed preplanned curriculum, and provided teacher-directed activities to children articulated beliefs that endorsed more academic-oriented approaches to learning that were less aligned with DAP practices (Wen et al., 2011, p.947).

In another study, Banu (2014) explored the association of teachers' conceptualizations of their roles as teachers and how they structured their classrooms and interacted with students. Banu (2014) found that when early childhood teachers believed their role was to transfer subject knowledge in a structured way so that children could memorize the information, those teachers created classroom environments where children were quiet and submissive. These teachers also favored the transmission method of transferring knowledge to children. On the other hand, when teachers believed that children were not passive recipients in the classroom, and in fact were able to develop themselves intellectually and socially as they participated as active learners, those teachers used constructivist approaches in helping children acquire knowledge (pp. 38-9). Banu (2014) concluded that the teachers who employed the constructivist approach to classroom activity appeared to value the children's improvement in thinking and reasoning over the achievement of a particular curriculum or acquisition of content knowledge. In this study, Banu found a more evident link between beliefs and practices.

Despite the studies cited above, research into the worlds of the

prekindergarten and kindergarten teacher are more rare than common. Wen et al.

(2011) state:

Systematic investigations on {preschool} teachers' underlying beliefs and

contextual explorations of their practices have been rare. The majority of

research has been on kindergarten, elementary, and secondary school

teachers rather than preschool teachers (p. 946).

Considering the atmosphere of high-stakes testing that permeates public early

childhood education, exploring the conceptualizations of learning held by teachers

may be critical in helping teachers understand and adjust to workplace

environments. Gill and Hoffman (2009) contend that beliefs and practices are

extricably linked, therefore making it important and beneficial to access teacher

beliefs.

A Link between Teachers' Conceptualizations and Student Experiences

Early childhood teachers' beliefs are thought to impact teacher practices

because they appear to change teacher behaviors such as classroom management,

instruction, pedagogical methods, and planning. As teachers change their practice,

they impact student experiences in the classroom (Banu, 2014; Wiebe-Berry, 2006;

Gutiervez, 1994; Brophy and Good, 1974; Avgitidou et al 2013). Teachers'

conceptualizations of learning are linked to what is provided to children in the

classroom. Goldstein (2008) states, "What children have the opportunity to learn

depends ultimately on what their teachers make available to them" (p. 460).

Teachers weed through mountainous amounts of knowledge and information and bring forth to their students what they deem relevant, appropriate, and necessary (Wen. et al., 2011; Clark & Peterson, 1986). This weeding-through-information also includes the commitment (or non-commitment) to enact state accountability mandates. Lipsky (1980) proposes that teachers make "street level" decisions about curricula, instruction, and classroom activity. Early childhood teachers, in effect, have the ability to create their own educational policies about what is learned by children. The gap between what is expected to be delivered by others (administrators, legislators, policy makers) to children, and what teachers actually bring to children, can pose a real problem to school districts, especially when high stakes testing holds schools accountable for what children know.

For instance, in a study of Swedish preschool teachers, Westman & Bergmark (2014) explored the tensions that were created when national academic reforms were pushed-down and mandated in early childhood classrooms. The new Swedish mandates required preschool teachers bring science exploratory activities into their classrooms. Teachers adapted to these new curriculum expectations by focusing on their interactions with students as a method for helping them integrate the required changes into their classrooms. As teachers worked to bring new science activities to children, they focused on being responsive to their children's wonderings about science. They listened to the children's scientific beliefs and theories and challenged them by asking questions. By focusing on the students' experience, Swedish preschool teachers were able to follow the children's lead and integrate science

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exploratory activities into the day. When the teachers looked back on the process of broadening their conceptualizations of what children could learn, they noted tensions around expanding their belief systems. Prevailing Swedish instructional norms did not characterize young children as competent learners, so the teachers experienced tension and doubt about their newfound focus on the children's scientific theories. The teachers had to fight against traditional views that restricted learning opportunities for children because of their perceived developmental needs and young age. The Swedish prekindergarten teachers overcame restrictive conceptualizations of learning by restructuring their mental images to include young children as competent learners who had the capacity to generate scientific theories and beliefs. The students' experiences in these Swedish classrooms were different because the teachers altered their conceptualizations of how and what children could learn (Westman and Bergmark, 2014).

Researchers have just begun to explore the association between early childhood teachers' conceptualizations of learning, enactments in the classroom, and the student experience. Peeraer et al. (2011) calls for further research that would "link teachers' beliefs, thoughts, theories, knowledge, and attitude *on one hand* and teacher behavior, classroom practices, and student outcomes on the other hand" (p.383). This research study was a response to the call for further research into the connections between a teacher's thinking about learning and the experiences she provides to children in her classroom.

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Theorizing Conceptualizations of Learning

As a framework for this research study, I have adopted the epistemological perspectives of constructivism and Dialogism. The epistemology of constructivism views the making-of-meaning as *relative*. The term *relative* means "in relationship" which suggests that meaning is co-constructed through the process of socially interacting with others. In socially interacting with others, one has to take into consideration all of the elements that come into play within that interaction. These elements may include the social, historical, cultural, and political influences that exist on a local, national, and international level (Moya, 2002; Holland et al., 1998). Vygotsky (1978), a well-known Russian educational thinker and researcher, explained how the social interactions one experiences as a child are internalized, and catalytic to birthing higher order thought processes. Vygotsky proposed that all higher mental functions are, in fact, internalized social relationships. He stated:

> Any function in the child's cultural [social] development appears twice, or in two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 163).

Vygotsky viewed the development of human consciousness as a process of "outside" (social) interactions and experiences moving "inward" (through internal dialogue). The process of internalizing social interactions allows the emerging adult to be cognizant of his/her thinking which provides the underpinnings to becoming a conscious human being. Vygotsky's perspective on how human consciousness

develops was in alignment, if not influenced, by Carl Marx. Marx asserted that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx in Tucker, 1978, p. 4). In other words, it is because we are *first* social beings that we can *become* conscious beings.

As social beings who inhabit a large and complex world, we can move in and out of social dialogues that contain all the thinking that has gone on before us. Bakhtin posited that the "very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*" (Bakhtin in Holoquist, 1990, p. 18). In his theoretical framework of Dialogism, Bakhtin described how the individual finds himself moving through, and situated within the world. Because the individual experiences the world as a constant dialogue between the self and others, the individual is *center* while all others are located outside that center. The notion of *otherness* is at the heart of how a person experiences the world, and understanding 'otherness' brings with it the empathy and sympathy for those outside our selves. Bakhtin's (1986, 1981) theoretical framework of Dialogism also explains how local, national, and international dialogues can create ideologies. Bakhtin saw ideologies as social constructions that both shape, and are shaped, by individual and collective thought.

Both the epistemological theory of constructivism and the theoretical framework of Dialogism contend individual consciousness is the outgrowth of social interactions. These two theoretical perspectives provide the epistemological lens for framing how teachers conceptualize learning and think about their enactments in

the early childhood classroom. Both constructivism and Dialogism allow for the notion that teachers' beliefs or conceptualizations about learning, and how those conceptualizations may influence classroom practices, is a co-construction alive within the teacher's consciousness. It is a co-construction that has been influenced through uncountable social interactions within political, cultural, and educational dialogues held over a lifetime.

Three Different Philosophical Approaches to Early Learning

The theoretical framework of constructivism and Dialogism characterize a teacher's conceptualization of learning as a co-construction "alive" within the teacher's consciousness. It is a co-construction that has been influenced through a lifetime of social interactions that include political, cultural, and educational influences (Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1980). In his theoretical framework of Dialogism, Bakhtin (1980) described how the individual finds himself both moving through the world and situated in the world.

In the field of early childhood education, teachers are situated in different work environments. These environments include public, for-profit, and non-profit settings that may stem from unique educational philosophical theories that prescribe different approaches to how young children learn in the classroom. In this study of how early childhood teachers conceptualize learning, I explored how different settings, and distinct educational philosophies, influenced teachers' conceptualizations of learning. I chose three different public educational settings in which to conduct my research. These varied settings included a pre-kindergarten

classroom in a local Head Start, a pre-kindergarten classroom in a public

International Baccalaureate (IB) charter school, and a pre-kindergarten classroom

in a public elementary school.

The ECE Public School Approach

The Texas public early childhood education system provided classroom

services to four-year olds, and in a more limited fashion, to three-year olds. Unlike

kindergarten (which is accessible to all Texas children), prekindergarten services,

whether for four-year olds or three-year olds, were not accessible to all children.

The Texas prekindergarten system was designed to help children who are viewed as

coming into the public education system with a disadvantage. To be eligible for

Texas prekindergarten services, children must be either a dual language learner;

eligible to participate in the national free or reduced lunch program; be homeless; a

child of an active military member; or be a child in the State foster care system (TEA,

2017). The intention of the Texas public ECE system was to provide the

aforementioned students with the opportunity to acclimate to a classroom

environment, and build a foundation of social emotional skills and academic

knowledge before entering kindergarten.

The ECE public school approach to learning recognizes that young children

benefit from social-emotional experiences, however, because prekindergarten must

be aligned with the larger public system (K-12) of high-stakes testing, public school

prekindergarten teachers are aware that their children must be ready for the STAAR

(State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) tests that begin in the third

grade. Within the Texas public school system, children in third grade must pass a math and reading test, children in fourth grade must pass a math, reading, and writing test, and children in the fifth grade must pass a math, reading, and science test in order to be promoted to the next grade. Texas public schools were expected to demonstrate acceptable academic performance standards (children passing tests and districts meeting certain indices) on a yearly basis. Based upon their students' academic performance, Texas school districts were ranked in one of three categories: met standard, met alternative standard, or improvement required. Schools deemed 'improvement required' must follow the directives of the Texas Commissioner of Education to remedy and improve the standing of a poor performing school (TEA. 2016). The Texas Education Agency provided information about each district's rating on its public website and this information was readily available to parents and the community. Such a public system of rating districts and schools puts tremendous pressure on public early childhood teachers to prepare their students for the academic testing that would be in their future.

The ECE Head Start Approach

The federally funded Head Start program was started in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. The Head Start Act of 2007 {42 USC 9801, 45 CFR 1301} re-authorized Head Start so it could continue operating in the nation as an early intervention program for children ages 0 – 5 years. The Head Start Act of 2007 also repurposed Head Start and tasked the program with two primary goals. The first was to "promote the school readiness of low-income

children by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development" (Head Start Act, 2007, p.2). The second goal was to provide each participating family with the "health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services that are determined based on a family needs assessment to be necessary (Head Start Act, 2007, p.2). In Head Start, the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework,* which details the domains that contribute to children becoming school ready, has consistently emphasized the central role of the child's early approach to learning in the successful attainment of school readiness skills and social adjustment (McDermott, et al., 2014, p. 200) The Head Start approach to early childhood placed a priority on developing and identifying the unique ways children learned within the classroom environment. Nurturing the child's unique learning style was seen as the inroad to helping the child develop social-emotional skills and the capacity to acquire academic knowledge.

Head Start was designed to serve families living in poverty (as defined by the federal government). According to the 2012 Census Bureau, 16 million children or 21.9% of all children (under the age of 18) lived in households with limited means. Approximately 2.8 million of those children actually lived in extreme poverty. Children who come from families who struggle with limited resources often enter school with cognitive and social skills lagging behind their more affluent peers (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Entering school without the same level of skills as their classmates can be predictive of lower academic achievement (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and lead to acclimation problems within the early childhood

classroom (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2011; Smith-Donald et al., 2007; Blair and Razza, 2007). The prevailing discourse in the United States about children living in poverty calls for early intervention with these children and their families. Parents living with poverty are said to need intervention programs that teach them "good parenting' skills (Saavedra, 2011) and children living in poverty need intervention programs that teach self-regulation, social-emotional skills, and school readiness skills so the odds can be shifted in favor of better outcomes (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). America's Head Start program was designed to provide children coming from poverty with a 'head start' as they enter public kindergarten and compete against children who have more developed social and academic skills.

The ECE International Baccalaureate (IB) Public Charter School Approach

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program of education provided children (ages 3-19) with four distinct phases of study. The early education or Primary Years Program (PYP) "prepares students to become active, caring, lifelong learners who demonstrate respect for themselves and others, and have the capacity to participate in the world around them" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013). The IB approach to learning strove to help children develop into sensitive problem solvers who had a broader understanding of how people and the environment are inter-connected. A priority of an IB school was to provide children with opportunities that allowed them to construct their learning experiences by working collaboratively with one another on a project or solving a problem. The IB course of

study included more than the acquisition of traditional core subjects. The five

essential elements in a PYP course of study were: knowledge in traditional subject

areas; concepts explored through structured inquiry; skills or broad capabilities;

attitudes that connect with the IB learner profile; and thoughtful appropriate action

(IB Organization, 2013). The IB learner developed ideas about how the world

worked and was encouraged to question, consider, and refine their understanding

of the social and natural world. As part of their elementary educational experience,

children were expected to carry out an extended, in-depth, collaborative project

known as the PYP exhibition. This exhibition project required students work

collaboratively with one another and conduct an inquiry into a real-life issue or

problem. The exhibition project was also expected to mirror the attributes of the IB

learner profile. Children of all ages and in every grade, learned and modeled the

attributes that made up the IB learner profile. Children learned to become

inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded,

caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective. The IB program of study was an

international offering and was found in countries such as India, Ecuador, the United

States, and Canada.

A Texas IB charter school was still a public school, and so it was required to

meet the same academic performance standards as any other Texas public school. A

successful IB charter school would be rated 'met alternative standard' under the

Texas Education Agency (TEA) school accountability rating system (TEA, 2016).

Children attending a Texas charter school participated in the STAAR high-stakes

testing system and were expected to pass the same tests as their counter-parts in the public schools. Charter schools that failed to meet the TEA accountability standards had to follow the Commissioner of Education directives and were placed on an improvement plan that could last one to five years. Although the IB educational program strove to broaden the student's working knowledge of the world, in Texas, IB teachers were very aware of the testing program that awaited their young children as they approached the third grade.

Research Questions, Benefit, and Importance of the Study

My research study was an exploration of the links between a teacher's conceptualization of learning and her classroom practices and interactions with children. It also explored the interface between a teacher's conceptualization of learning and the ecologies of her workplace environment. The research questions were:

1. How do four prekindergarten teachers articulate their conceptualizations of learning and think about the best educational setting for young children?

2. How do teachers understand the pedagogical ecologies of their educational setting, and how does this understanding interface with their conceptualizations of learning?

Benefit of the Study

My research study benefited teachers as it provided them with the opportunity to articulate how they conceptualized learning and think about what

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they provided to children in the classroom. As teachers accessed their mental images of how learning occurred, they became more cognizant about how they thought about learning and teaching. I found that teachers were able to articulate how their conceptualizations were linked to their classroom practices, and they could explain why they provided certain activities to children. It helped teachers make a connection between what they were thinking and what they were doing.

Importance of the Study

This study was significant because very little research has been conducted to uncover a teacher's belief system, and then tie those beliefs to her epistemological perspectives or conceptualizations of learning (Wibe-Berry, 2006; Yosso, 2002). Also, systematic investigations into [preschool] teachers' underlying beliefs and the *contextual f*actors that may contribute to conceptualizations of learning, beliefs, and enactments in the classroom have been rare (Wen et al. 2011). In this research study, the participating teachers were able to identify those contextual elements within their workplace ecologies that they accepted, struggled with, or rejected. This study was important because it added new understandings of the links between teachers' conceptualizations of learning, the experiences they provided children, and the teachers' perceptions of the unique ecologies of their workplace environment.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This research study was an exploration of the links between a teacher's conceptualizations of learning and her classroom practices and interactions with children. This study also explored the interface between a teacher's conceptualizations of learning and the ecologies of her workplace environment. The intent of the study was to try to understand why young children in various early childhood classrooms experienced learning in different ways (i.e. Ms. Nino and Ms. Murphy). To build an understanding of why teachers teach like they do, the following literature review describes the research on teachers' beliefs about learning and their classroom practices. My literature review begins with a description of how the research on teacher thought and action has evolved over time. It then focuses on characterizing beliefs—it explores the notion that beliefs begin as thoughts and that beliefs are implicit and inferred. It describes how teachers' rationales are a window into understanding their beliefs and that the findings on the links between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices is inconsistent—sometimes there appears to be a link, and at other times there does not. This literature review includes research on teachers' epistemic beliefs and how beliefs can change over time. The literature review concludes with sections on the limitations teachers may experience in implementing their beliefs into the classroom and how beliefs can create resistance to educational reforms.

The Research on Teacher Beliefs and Thoughts

The thinking by researchers on the links between teacher thought and action has evolved over time. In 1986, Clark and Peterson conceptualized the relationship between teacher thought and action as linear and one-dimensional. In 1987, Clandinin and Connelly posited that teacher thinking was a dialectical process composed of multiple factors that often work in opposition to one another. A dialectical process viewed the interactions between teachers and students as the opposing and contradictory forces within the world of teaching (Marsh, 2003, p. 3). These contradictory forces and/or interactions between teachers and students influence and shape teacher thought.

As the research on how teachers think about teaching evolved, Carter (1990) explored how teachers navigate their work environments as a way of understanding how contextual factors shape teacher thought and action. As a result of his research, he moved the construct of teacher thinking beyond the characterizations of being linear or dialectic, and moved teacher thinking into a construct where it was an "ongoing dialogue among one's personal history, present conditions, beliefs, values and the social, cultural, and political forces that surround groups of individuals in a given time and place" (Marsh, 2003, p.7). This 'ongoing dialogue' with past and present conditions brought contextual factors to bear upon teacher thinking, and this newer way of characterizing teacher thinking was in alignment with the epistemological perspectives of constructivism and Dialogism. (Bahktin, 1980; Holoquist, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

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Another way researchers have described an individual's internal belief system is to use the term 'disposition'. An individual's unique disposition is the result of living long in a social, cultural, and political world. Panofsky (2003) states:

Teachers and other educational personnel at all levels go to work with their own social and cultural dispositions, their habitus highly developed over years of lived experience in a stratified and stratifying society (p.424).

Like any other profession--over time--teachers develop social and cultural dispositions about their professional roles, and bring those dispositions with them into the classroom (Panofsky, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Choy and Oo, 2012).

As time has progressed, research has moved away from characterizing teacher thinking as a one-dimensional interaction, and now characterizes it as a multi-dimensional interaction that includes the elements of social, political, historical, and cultural influences.

Beliefs Begin as a Thought

How do beliefs form? Beliefs may begin as a thought. In 1992, Pajares described how beliefs might form. He states:

Thought processes may well be precursors to the creation of beliefs, but the filtering effect of belief structures ultimately screens, redefines, distorts, and reshapes subsequent thinking and information processing (pgs. 325-6).

Beliefs that begin as thoughts and then act like filters are not necessarily tangible to others. Beliefs and belief systems are internal, and so knowledge about them must be inferred by observing the individual's actions and behaviors.

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Beliefs are Implicit and Inferred

For a teacher, her beliefs are what she 'knows' about learning and teaching.

Outside forces that are not fully recognized by a teacher can influence what she

knows about learning and teaching. Gill and Hoffman (2009) explain:

> An individual's belief orientation may be unknowingly guided by implicit
>
> beliefs, or those an individual is unable or unwilling to consciously
>
> acknowledge (p.1247).

Implicit beliefs are hidden from an individual and can be 'unknown'. Implicit beliefs

can unknowingly influence how a teacher manages her classroom and interacts with

children (Nuthall, 2005 in Gill and Hoffman, 2009; Moje and Wade, 1997).

Teachers' implicit beliefs are complex and not easily accessible. Because

teacher beliefs are not measurable or observable they must be inferred from teacher

behaviors (Ryan, 2000). Teacher beliefs need to be "examined from multiple angles

using a variety of methods in order to increase our understanding of their nature

and influence" (Gill and Hoffman, 2009, pgs. 1267-8).

One of the methods for uncovering teachers' implicit belief systems is to

explore the reasons teachers give for the decisions they make about curriculum and

pedagogy. A significant portion of the research into the nature of teachers' implicit

beliefs explores the rationales teachers offer for their educational decisions and

infers teachers' beliefs from the rationales they provide. Teacher rationales are

considered windows into the world of their epistemic perspectives on learning

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(Anderson and Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Cassidy and Lawrence, 2000; Gray, 2001; Larson and Silverman, 2005).

Teacher Rationales as a Way of Inferring Beliefs

A significant portion of the research on teacher beliefs has been an exploration into the reasons teachers give for the decisions they make about what knowledge they will bring to children, and how they will bring knowledge to children (Anderson and Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Cassidy and Lawrence, 2000; Gray, 2001; Larson and Silverman, 2005). The rationales teachers provide when discussing their instructional decisions are thought to be reflective of their internal beliefs about learning and teaching (Gill and Hoffman, 2001). For instance, in a study designed to provide insight into the reasons behind teachers' decision-making, Gill and Hoffman (2009) observe the back-and-forth dialogue between four middle school math teachers as they discuss and plan their lessons. Over the course of a semester, the researchers record the teachers' weekly discussions and look for emerging topics or themes. They discover that the dialogue generated by these four middle school math teachers originate around six themes: pedagogical content, general pedagogy, subject matter, curriculum choices, textbooks and students' abilities (pgs. 1253-1263). In their lesson planning sessions, the teachers do not provide much insight into their beliefs around learning. They do, however, offer some thoughts about the *capacity* they feel their students have for learning. The middle school teachers see their students' capacity for learning as a finite personality trait.

The research by Gill and Hoffman (2009) is representative of the body of research on teacher rationales as being windows into their thinking about learning and teaching. Other methods for exploring teacher implicit belief systems include teacher self-report surveys, classroom observations, and teacher reflection on videoed classroom practices (Gill and Hoffman, 2009; Wen et al., 2011; Moje and Wade, 1997; Peeraer et al., 2011; Wiebe-Berry, 2006; Walker et al., 2012; Choy and Oo, 2012; Jansen and Spitzer, 2009).

Research on Teacher Belief Systems is Inconsistent

The challenge of *inferring* teacher belief systems has resulted in inconsistent research findings in linking teachers' beliefs with their practices (Wen et al., 2011). Sometimes researchers find links between teachers' beliefs and their practices, and sometimes they do not.

For instance, Gill and Hoffman (2009) found an association between the activities teachers provide to children and their beliefs about learning and knowledge. Pajares (1992) found an association between teacher beliefs and how teachers organize tasks and behave in the classroom. In contrast however, Wilcox-Herzog (2002) --in a study of 47 preschool teachers--did not find a strong relationship between teachers' self-reported beliefs and their practices in the classroom. Peeraer et al. (2011) also found that the way in which teachers think about learning do not automatically convert into their teaching practice.

As an example of a research study that found inconsistent links between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, Wen et al. (2011) explored teachers'

curriculum beliefs to find if they were consistent with observed classroom practices.

All of the participating preschool teachers had earlier espoused child-centered

learning beliefs. Yet classroom observations show the teachers exhibiting a

relatively high frequency of directive behaviors during teacher-child interactions (p.

961). Furthermore, preschool teachers who endorse teacher-directed learning

beliefs are less likely to encourage children's self-initiation and exploration in the

classroom (p. 960). Although Wen et al. (2011) find weak correlations between

teachers' beliefs about children's optimal learning and their actual teaching

practices (p. 961), they do find a strong association between teachers' endorsement

of teacher-directed learning beliefs and the frequency of their use of directive

behaviors with children. This is particularly true of teachers who have more work

experience (p. 960). Wen et al. (2011) concluded that teachers with more

professional preparation and experience are more consistent with what they say

they believe and what they practice in the classroom--regardless of the nature of

their beliefs (p. 963).

In the research on teacher beliefs and classroom practices, the inconclusive

results linking beliefs and classroom practices may be due to an incongruence

between what teachers say they believe and what they actually do in the classroom.

One of the traditional methods for studying belief systems is the comparison of

teacher self-report instruments (surveys and questionnaires) to subsequent teacher

behaviors in the classroom (Gill and Hoffman, 2009). When research efforts produce

weak associations between beliefs and actions, the findings may be reflective of self-

reported beliefs and observed classroom behaviors that do not align with one another (Wen et al., 2011). One of the explanations for the lack of alignment between beliefs and practices is the tendency of self-report instruments to ask broad educational questions, and observers who focus on specific teacher behaviors in the classroom (Wen et al., 2011).

Teachers' Epistemic Beliefs

In a study titled, *Epistemological Beliefs in Child Care: Implications for Vocational Education*, Brownlee et al. (2008) created a written childcare scenario and asked 77 students (who were in the process of earning a Diploma of Children's Services, ECE preparation in Australia) to respond to their scenario. The scenarios were designed to help students articulate their epistemological beliefs about knowledge. Brownlee et al. (2008) found that early childhood pre-service teachers who hold beliefs that view knowledge as tentative, multiplistic, and evidence-based demonstrate higher levels of reflection and advocate for teaching approaches that engage young children in active thinking and problem-solving. On the other hand, teachers who describe knowledge as fixed and unchanging demonstrate less capacity to reflect on their teaching practices are more likely to promote approaches to teaching that are teacher-centered and transmissive.

In the article entitled, *Early Years Teachers' Epistemic Beliefs and Beliefs about Children's Moral Learning,* Walker et al. (2012) explored the association of teachers' epistemic beliefs to their views on moral learning. These researchers electronically surveyed 379 Australian early learning teachers about their views on learning and

knowledge. Walker et al. (2012) report that the teachers who view children as capable also characterize knowledge as uncertain (to be questioned) and believe that learning is complex and would take time. On the other hand, teachers who believe children need to learn-the-rules view knowledge as certain and see their children's abilities to be innate or inbred (p. 701).

In another study on teachers' beliefs around knowledge, Moje and Wade (1997) attempt to uncover the sociocultural constructs and images teachers use in teaching literacy. Although many of the 40 teachers in the study argue for a constructivist theory of learning, little in their dialogue suggests that they view knowledge as a construction. Teachers characterize knowledge as being fixed rather than relative, fluid, or changeable. The teachers who view knowledge as fixed also see student ability as innate or fixed (p. 704).

In a study about teachers' curriculum beliefs and their knowledge of child development, Riojas-Cortez et al. (2013) create a two-year cohort of five early childhood teachers (who are also graduate students) to explore their willingness to change their epistemological paradigms--and in doing so--change their classroom practices. Initially, the teachers' epistemological paradigms are linked to their role as teachers and the curriculum. Riojas-Cortez et al. (2013) state:

> Our participants' initial epistemological paradigms were grounded in their
> role as teachers driving the curriculum rather than an understanding of
> children's development and learning (p. 40).

Riojas-Cortez et al. (2012) found that teachers who do not have an understanding of developmental appropriate practices are reluctant to alter their curriculum beliefs, and stand apart from the teachers who view learning as a process of interactions with peers and teachers and as engagement within the classroom ecology (p. 40). As the teachers in the cohort become more knowledgeable about child development, they are more willing to articulate child-centered practices to administrators and parents (p.41). Riojas-Cortez et al. (2013) caution that the transformative process in bringing about teachers' epistemological and behavior changes require creating a safe place for teachers to engage in critical discourse so that they can reflect on their beliefs and practices (pgs. 39 & 43).

Beliefs Can Change Over Time

Teachers' beliefs can change over time. Sometimes teachers' beliefs change as a result of some sort of change in the classroom. In a study of Swedish early childhood teachers, Westman and Bergmark (2014) explore how 10 teachers in two different preschools are able to (or not able to) broaden their conceptualizations of early childhood learning. As described in the study, recent Swedish educational reforms are challenging early childhood teachers (who believe in the importance of the social emotional development of the child) to include more teacher-directed activities in their day. The purpose for including more teacher-directed activities is to further the acquisition of science knowledge in the classroom through exploratory activities. Westman and Bergmark (2014) found that the teachers' ability to incorporate the new emphasis on science exploration is contingent upon

their ability to arrange the classroom setting for exploration. Teachers re-arrange

the classroom to open up space for science activities or deliberately choose places

that supported science activities like a meadow or forest. The teachers who make

room for science activities are also the teachers who begin to widen their

conceptualizations of learning to include learning through teacher-directed activity.

The teachers' broadening mental images of how children learn result in real changes

in the nature of the learning experiences they provide to children.

Contextual Constraints to Implementing Beliefs

Teachers may want to implement changes in their classrooms, but

sometimes contextual restraints within their workplace environments limit their

ability to do so. In a study designed to understand the sociocultural and semiotic

tools used by teachers to identify issues around teaching and learning literacy, Moje

and Wade (1997) found that pre-service teachers identify a different source of

constraints to their teaching than do practicing teachers. Both sets of teachers are

enrolled in a college course of study that has them participating in case discussions,

debriefing sessions, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. The pre-

service teachers identify contextual constraints stemming from their university

network, experiences as students, and the theories and texts from their university

coursework. The practicing teachers identify contextual constraints that stem from

their school networks and experiences as teachers. These include constraints such

as high number of students, limitations on time, and management demands.

Practicing teachers also discuss constraints that stem from broader societal and

community goals such as limits on money and resources, and demands for accountability i.e. improved test scores. These constraints influence their teaching and pedagogical decisions and practices (p. 701).

Other researchers have discovered different contextual constraints that serve as barriers to teachers fully enacting their beliefs around learning in the classroom. In Sweden, integrating exploration activities into the early childhood classroom is limited by classroom space and available time (Westman and Bergmark, 2014). In the United States, Gill and Hoffman (2009) found that teachers' capacity for adapting their thought processes and teaching styles are based upon available time and the expectations of leadership. Wen et al. (2011) found that contextual factors such as the school's philosophy, a supervisor's support or lack of support, parents' expectations, and professional development activities limits how freely teachers are able to put their beliefs into practice (p. 949).

The failure to take into consideration how contextual factors impact teachers' beliefs and practices may be a mitigating factor in a pattern of inconsistent findings within the body of research on the links between teachers' beliefs and practices. Wen et al. (2011) state, "Previous studies have usually failed to account for possible moderating factors: conditions or contexts that could potentially influence the strength of the association between beliefs and practices" (p. 950). Exploring the contextual factors of the teacher's workplace environment may shed light on not only the links between teachers' beliefs and practices, but also on the

teacher's ability to implement changes in the classroom and/or the teacher's

willingness *to* implement changes in the classroom.

Beliefs Can Create Resistance to Reforms

Teachers' beliefs can be an impediment to the successful implementation of

educational reforms. In a study that explored preschool teachers' cultural

conceptions of play and learning--and their children's actual play experiences in

kindergarten in two different countries--Wu and Rao (2011) were able to observe

22 Chinese kindergarten teachers and 15 German kindergarten teachers. In both

China and Germany, the national government was altering previously held

conceptualizations of early learning and practices in the kindergarten classroom.

For instance, in Germany, free play had held a significant role in early childhood

largely due to the influence of Froebel (p. 470). However, because of poor student

performance on national tests, the position of play was being threatened by

educational reforms that placed more emphasis on academic skills in the

kindergarten classroom (p.470-1). The opposite was happening in Hong Kong. In

Hong Kong, the emphasis in early childhood classrooms had been on thematic

academic curriculum that was teacher-directed. However, in 2006, the Chinese

Curriculum Development Council adopted a life-wide approach to learning that

required teachers to not only transmit knowledge, but also facilitate children in

constructing their own knowledge. The new guidelines stressed the role of play and

moving toward a child-centered pedagogy (p. 471).

In both Germany and Hong Kong, early childhood teachers are struggling to implement reforms that did not align with their beliefs on learning. Wu and Rao (2011) concluded that the Chinese teachers' beliefs become constraints for fully adopting the country's new play-based pedagogy while German teachers face the challenge of how to incorporate more learning elements in their child-centered curriculum that have free play as the main activity (pp. 479 &480).

In another early childhood study, Leaupepe (2009) explored the tensions that surfaced when pre-service teachers bring deep-seated beliefs to their studies--beliefs that are challenged by ideas in their courses. The students in this study are aspiring early childhood teachers who leave their Pacific island childhood homes to attend The University of Auckland in New Zealand. The Pasifika students bring with them deep-seated cultural beliefs about early childhood, particularly beliefs about the role of play. They come to their studies from island societies based on traditional economics where young children work at an early age and play is seen as a reward for the work they do. For these students, play is not serious and is considered a waste of time because work is what allows the family to survive.

The faculty at the University of Auckland present a different view of play to their Pasifika students. In New Zealand, play is considered a child's 'work'. The Pasifika students seem to open themselves up to this new paradigm of play, however, as they enter classrooms as new teachers, Leaupepe (2009) found that the "beliefs internalized during childhood were shaken by the new knowledge [of play], that is true, but they were not dislodged" (p. 62). Leaupepe concluded that such

change-resistant beliefs have implications for New Zealand early childhood teacher education programs. For the Pasifika island students, the self-reflection activities included in their teacher preparation course of study do not prove sufficient enough to alter the beliefs that are so deeply culturally embedded.

Beliefs Are Multi-Faceted

In the 1990's, other researchers join the dialogue about teacher beliefs. They bring new dimensions to the narrative on teacher beliefs. Beliefs are not seen as a dyad between knowledge and beliefs. In 2000, Phyllis Ryan provides the following 7 statements about beliefs:

1. Beliefs are evaluative and not factual and non-consensual.

2. Beliefs may be descriptive, prescriptive, and have a cognitive component.

3. Beliefs are mental constructs of experience often condensed into schemata.

4. Beliefs are not measured or observed, but inferred.

5. A belief makes an assertion about some matter of fact, principle, or law.

6. Beliefs can persist when they no longer accurately represent reality.

7. The earlier beliefs are incorporated into the belief system, the more difficult they are to alter (Ryan, 2000, p. 611).

Before Ryan's seven statements about the nature of beliefs, beliefs were considered non-demonstrable while knowledge was seen as demonstrable. Ryan's (2000)

characterization of beliefs introduce a cognitive component to beliefs--a cognitive component that could lead to the production of internal mental constructs.

Exploration by researchers into the nature of beliefs continues. Beliefs are thought to become belief systems that coalesce and form into an internal structure known as schemata. Marsh (2003) defines schemata as an individual's "loosely-bound system [that has] no clear logical rules for determining the relevance of beliefs to real-world events" (p. 611). An individual's personal schemata reflects what the individual feels is true--and it can be disconnected to real-world events. A belief adopted by an individual can persist even when it no longer represents an accurate representation of reality, and indeed, the earlier the belief is adopted, the more tenacious it becomes (Ryan, 2000, p. 611).

Ryan's (2000) seven statements about the nature of beliefs represents a more complex characterization of beliefs than provided by Devon Woods (1996). However, Ryan's statements lack complexities earlier posited by Frank Pajares (1992) about the nature of beliefs. Pajares (1992) suggests that belief systems are acquired through social interactions, and that belief systems act as filters screening new, incoming information and experiences. He offers the following statements as a guide to researchers in their study of belief systems:

1. Individuals develop a belief system that houses all the beliefs acquired through the process of cultural transmission.

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2. Knowledge and beliefs are inextricably intertwined, but the potent affective, evaluative and episodic nature of beliefs makes them filters through which new phenomena are interpreted.

3. Thought processes may well be precursors to the creation of beliefs, but the filtering effect of belief structures ultimately screens, redefines, distorts, and reshapes subsequent thinking and information processing (pgs. 325-6).

Pajares (1992) suggests researchers should consider the cultural elements that play a part in the formation of belief systems. He advocates that belief systems act like filters during the processing of new experiences--and beliefs have a role in the reshaping of subsequent thinking by the individual. Pajares proposes that knowledge and beliefs are "inextricably intertwined". He views knowledge as verifiable, and beliefs as unverifiable. Over time, the thinking about the formation of beliefs and belief systems has evolved. However, a group of Pajares contemporaries posited a different way of thinking about knowledge and beliefs.

In an article titled *Coming to Terms: How Researchers in Learning and Literacy Talk about Knowledge*, Alexander, Schallert and Hare (1991) put forth a different way of thinking about knowledge and beliefs. They state:

Knowledge refers to an individual's personal stock of information, skills, experiences, beliefs and memories. It encompasses all that a person knows or believes to be true, whether or not it is verified as true in some sort of objective or external way (p. 317).

For Alexander, Schallert and Hare (1991), knowledge becomes a construct held by an individual that includes the person's belief system--whether those beliefs are verifiable or not. This way of looking at knowledge explains why teachers--when describing how they think about teaching--intertwine knowledge and beliefs (Woods, 1996; Pajares, 1992). Teachers may view knowledge as what they "believe to be true, whether or not it is verified in some sort of objective or internal way" (Alexander et al., 1991, p. 317) because it includes what they believe to be true.

Characterizing Learning

In 1968, Phillip Jackson expressed a hope that the nearby future would bring about a *scientific theory of learning* that would, in turn, "have immediate and direct consequences for the improvement of teachers' work" (p. 169). Unfortunately, that scientific theory of learning did not emerge. Thirty-three years later, William White (2001) stated:

> Educational researchers will quickly admit that there is no single, one way, of explaining *how learning takes place*, which we can teach with such confidence that all other theories are unacceptable or wrong (p.70).

Throughout the ensuing years, what emerges are descriptions of how children learn (White, 2001) or descriptions of the dimensions that constitute a learning system (Watkins et al., 2007; Alexander et al., 2010).

William White's (2001) social learning theory describes three steps in how children learn: the child learns by observing a behavioral model, the child then understands the consequences or results of the model's behavior, and finally the

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child undergoes an internal thinking and feeling process about what has been observed (p. 70). White (2001) describes three types of models that children observe in the world: a real live model like a parent, teacher, or peer; a symbolic model such as a character in a film; or a model that is verbally described such as oral or written characterizations of heroes or heroines (p. 70). Children observing a given model learn how to incorporate the thinking, feeling, and behavior of that model into their own learning (White, 2001, pg. 73). White characterizes learning as a behavioral change after modeled behavior is internalized.

Rather than try to capture how children learn, other researchers provide descriptions of the dimensions or elements deemed to be characteristic of the learning *process*. Watkins et al. (2007) state that active learning is comprised of three distinct dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and social. Alexander, Schallert and Reynolds (2010) in their article, *What is Learning Anyway? A Topographical Perspective Considered,* provide a more robust list of dimensions that characterize learning. They portray learning as a flowing river system that is dynamic and in continual flux (p. 176). Alexander, Schallert and Reynolds (2010) contend that one's conceptualizations of learning, "Whether expressed or not, shape everyday decisions that have import in our lives" (p. 177). In an attempt to find common ground among the different learning perspectives in psychology and education, they offer nine Principles of Learning:

1. Learning is change.
2. Learning is inevitable, essential, and ubiquitous.

3. Learning can be resisted.

4. Learning may be disadvantageous.

5. Learning can be tacit and incidental as well as conscious and intentional.

6. Learning is framed by our humanness.

7. Learning refers to both a process and a product.

8. Learning is different at different points in time.

9. Learning is interactional (Alexander et al, 2010, p. 177).

One of the unique aspects of The Principles of Learning advanced by Alexander, Schallert and Reynolds (2010) is the notion that there are circumstances when learning is not advantageous to the individual i.e. propaganda that may propel an individual to join a cult.

L.S. Vygotsky (1978) in his book, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process*, went beyond characterizing the process of learning and connected learning with the development of higher mental abilities. Vygotsky states:

Properly organized learning results in mental development and sets into motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning (p. 90).

For Vygotsky (1978), properly organized learning environments are critical to the development of higher order thought processes. This means the developmental process lags behind learning, and that a child's mental capacities are not fully developed as a result of the child simply aging. The development of higher order

thinking skills requires learning, and learning is defined as the child interacting with people and peers (p. 90).

This literature review on the nature of learning brings forth many characterizations of learning. Learning encompasses the behavioral, cognitive, and social domains (Watkins et al., 2017). Learning results in change, is inevitable, and is different at different points in time (Alexander et al., 2010). Learning can also be disadvantageous i.e. leave the individual with counterproductive behaviors or biased points of view (Alexander at al., 2010; Dewey, 1938). Learning is catalytic to the development of higher order thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978) and is both a product and a process (Alexander et. al, 2010). A comprehensive *definition of learning* might encompass many (if not all) these points of view. In 2010, Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds offer the following broad and inclusive definition of learning:

> Learning is a multidimensional process that results in a relatively enduring change in a person or persons, and consequently how that person or persons will perceive the world and reciprocally respond to its affordances physically, psychologically, and socially. The process of learning has as its foundation the systemic, dynamic, and interactive relation between the nature of the learner and the object of the learning as ecologically situated in a given time in place as well as over time (p. 186).

This definition encompasses the human domains of behavior, cognition, and social interaction while also taking into consideration the relationship between the

learner, his environment and others. It describes learning as process that results in change within the individual. The changes that come with learning will influence how a person perceives the world and how he/she responds to it.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research study was an exploration of the links between a teacher's conceptualization of learning and her classroom practices and interactions with children. This study also explored the interface between a teacher's conceptualization of learning and the ecology of her workplace environment. The research questions were:

1. How do four prekindergarten teachers articulate their conceptualizations of learning and think about the best educational setting for young children?

2. How do teachers understand the pedagogical ecologies of their educational setting, and how does that understanding influence their conceptualizations of learning?

My research study was a qualitative study that employed the methodology of an ethnographic case study.

Ethnographic Case Study

Case Study

A case study is "an intensive study of an individual, institution, organization, or some bounded group, place, or process over time (Glesne, 2011, p. 279). In a case study, various methods and methodologies can be employed to collect data. Stake (2000) observed that "A case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied" (p.435). A researcher conducting a case study gathers data through the methods of participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and the

collection of artifacts. These methods for gathering data are also methods used in ethnographic research.

Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research seeks to characterize what a group of individuals finds meaningful and important, their socially held perspectives, their logic and ways of thinking, and the elements of culture that serve to bind them (Leino, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Emerson et al., 1995; Tobin et al., 2009). Through observations, interviews, and collecting artifacts, the ethnographer strives to uncover the group's logic, ways of thinking, or socially held perspectives (Walford, 2009 in Leino, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Ethnographic writing strives to capture in rich detail what has been observed and described in such a way that the reader can picture being part of the group's daily routines and customs. Data collection in an ethnographic study is relatively unstructured. It does not involve a fixed and detailed research design at the start of the project, and coded categories are generated out of the process of data analysis rather than inserted previous to the collection of data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.3).

Ethnographic Case Study

Ethnographic case studies are studies that focus on the sociocultural interpretation of a particular group (Merriam, 2002). In an ethnographic case study, the common denominator is that each person, village, event or program is a bounded system with working parts (Stake, 1995). A researcher conducting an ethnographic case study employs the data gathering methods of participant

observation, in-depth interviewing, and the collection of artifacts. Grounded theory

can be built within a case study where the researcher does not begin with a theory

to prove, but rather begins with an area of inquiry and then what is pertinent to that

area emerges through data collection and a systematic analytic process (Strauss and

Corbin, 1990). In an ethnographic case study, the comparison of more than one case

lends itself to a search for patterns (Glesne, 2011, p.22) and Creswell (2008)

recommends four cases to provide the appropriate depth for identifying

documenting and exploring the pedagogical practices of teachers.

Methodological Congruence

Methodological congruence means there is an alignment between the nature

of one's research goals and the corresponding methodology employed in the

collection of data (Morse and Richards (2002). In my research study, the research

questions aligned with the theoretical framework of constructivism and Dialogism--

which posit that meaning arises out of social interaction and engagement in

dialogue (Bahktin, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978). By nature, the teaching and learning that

goes on in a prekindergarten classroom is an interactive, social experience. My

research questions were designed to explore how a prekindergarten teacher created

meaning around learning and teaching in the classroom—both of which were

decidedly social interactions with dialogue at its nexus.

Research Sites

Three research sites were identified and chosen for this study. The three

sites were chosen because they contained at least one prekindergarten classroom in

a public-school setting, and the three public-school settings were located within the same geographical area—within or close to the same large, central Texas city. The geographical location and the public nature of each site ensured that the children (although not the focus of the study nor identified as participants in the study) shared one similar characteristic—they came from households with low socioeconomic means. The three research sites in this study consisted of a public-school classroom, a Head Start classroom, and a public charter-school classroom.

Summerton Public Elementary School

Summerton Elementary School was one of 13 elementary schools positioned within in a large school district (221 square miles) just outside the aforementioned large, central Texas city. The school's mission was three-fold: meet students' individual needs; collaborate with the community and celebrate diversity; and open doors through technology. Summerton Elementary School was one of two dual-language elementary campuses within the district. The school had adopted the tenants of the *7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life* by Scott Shickler and Jeff Walker and lessons based on the book's tenants were to be provided to children on a weekly basis.

Summerton Elementary School had been rated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) as 'met standard' and had achieved one TEA rating of distinction for academic achievement in science. The school served 752 students--grades prekindergarten through fifth grade. Summerton Elementary was a Title I school with 71% of its students identified as economically disadvantaged. The school

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contained four prekindergarten classrooms, each staffed by a teacher and a

teacher's assistant.

Cypress Cove Head Start Classroom

The Cypress Cove Head Start classroom was part of a federally funded Head

Start agency that received its funding and opened its doors in 1992. This particular

Head Start served four rural counties located just outside a large, central Texas city.

The mission of this Head Start was twofold: to promote school readiness by offering

children learning experiences in a safe and healthy environment, and to improve the

quality of life for families by empowering them to become self-sufficient,

contributing members of society. In Head Start, the *Head Start Early Learning*

Outcomes Framework, which details the domains that contribute to children

becoming school ready, has consistently emphasized the central role of the child's

early approach to learning in the successful attainment of school readiness skills

and social adjustment (McDermott, et al., 2014, p. 200).

This Head Start agency focused on providing children with learning

experiences that taught children to value and respect themselves and others. The

program provided children with a comprehensive educational curriculum that was

designed to help children acquire self-regulation skills and social skills. Head Start

also provided health, mental health, and social services to the families it served.

Parents were encouraged to participate in their child's classroom, governance

activities, and parent education workshops. Within the county it served, 1,548

children were eligible for Head Start services. This particular Head Start was funded to serve 461 children—ages 3 months to five years.

Everest Peak IB Public Charter School

Everest Peak Charter School was a tuition free, college-preparatory elementary school founded in 1998. It was part of a charter-school district located within a large, central Texas city. As a charter school, Everest Peak had been accredited by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas State Board of Education. The school had adopted the tenants of the International Baccalaureate course of study that strove to prepare students to be worldly and collaborative problem-solvers. A priority of an IB school was to provide children with opportunities that allowed them to construct their learning experiences by working collaboratively with one another on a project or solving a problem. The IB course of study included more than the acquisition of traditional core subjects. The five essential elements in a PYP course of study were: knowledge in traditional subject areas; concepts explored through structured inquiry; skills or broad capabilities; attitudes that connect with the IB learner profile; and thoughtful appropriate action (IB Organization, 2013). The IB learner developed ideas about how the world worked and was encouraged to question, consider, and refine their understanding of the social and natural world.

Everest Peak had been rated by TEA as a campus that 'needs improvement' and was following a plan for improved academic performance. As a charter school, Everest Peak could charge students fees i.e. PE equipment, musical instruments,

meals, student identification cards and require students participate in a mandatory school dress code. The school served 440 students in grades prekindergarten through sixth grade. Everest Peak had one prekindergarten classroom staffed by a teacher and teaching assistant.

Participants

The four teachers in this case study taught prekindergarten children in a public setting—as opposed to a prekindergarten setting in the private sector that requires a payment of tuition for children's attendance. The four teachers had a varied number of years teaching, different familiar and educational backgrounds, and different teaching experiences. Each teacher chose her own pseudonym, and it was a fluke that three of the four teachers chose a name that began with the letter "B". This was fine with the researcher, but proved a challenge to keep up with during the aftermath of the data collection phase and during the analysis and writing process.

Bella--Public School Teacher

Bella grew up in a small town in Gary, Indiana. She attended St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana where she earned her BA in Education with an endorsement in early childhood. Upon graduation, Bella moved to Houston, Texas where she spent five years teaching second grade. She took a job in a different Houston school district and taught kindergarten there for 20 years. She then moved to Virginia for two years where she taught fourth and third grade. She had recently returned to Texas and had been teaching at Summerton Elementary School for two

years—one year in fourth grade and one year in prekindergarten. Bella identified herself as a monolingual White woman who was 54 years in age.

Laura—Head Start Teacher

Laura grew up in Fireball, a small town in California. After graduating from high school, Laura attended The University of Texas in San Antonio where she earned a BA in Psychology. She wanted to go into social work, but took a job with the Head Start agency that governed the Cypress Cove Head Start classroom. Laura was in her first year as a teacher during the timeframe of this study. Laura identified herself as a bilingual Hispanic woman who was 25 years in age.

Betty—Head Start Teacher

Betty grew up in Jamaica where she lived with her maternal grandparents. At fifteen years of age, she moved to the United States to join her parents who were already living in America. Betty attended Delmar Community college in Corpus Christy, Texas and then Texas State where she earned a BA in Science in the area of Family and Child Development. Betty taught in a church daycare setting for nine years in Austin, Texas. She taught for three different centrally-located Texas Head Start agencies for 11 years. Betty identified herself as a Jamaican woman who spoke both Jamaican Creole and English, and she was 43 years in age.

Bridgette—Public Charter-School Teacher

Bridgette grew up on the outskirts of Dallas, Texas. After graduating from high school, Bridgette attended Texas State in San Marcos, Texas where she earned a BA in Disciplinary Studies. She later attained the EC Generalist and ESL certifications

for her teaching license. Bridgette taught prekindergarten for the Austin Independent School district for four years and then she taught prekindergarten for one year in a private setting. At the time of the study, Bridgette had been teaching prekindergarten in the public charter-school for five years. Bridgette identified herself as a monolingual White woman who was 36 years of age.

The Prekindergarten Teachers Volunteer to Participate

The four prekindergarten teachers who participated in this study volunteered for the study. I contacted Bella's school district to see if they had a prekindergarten teacher who would be willing to volunteer for this study. The district's central office put me in touch with Bella's principal. The principal gave me permission to conduct my study on his campus. He spoke to Bella about my research, and she agreed to participate in my study. I contacted the Head Start director who oversaw the Cypress Cove Head Start site and explained my study to her. She contacted Betty and Laura to see if they would like to participate, and they both agreed. I contacted Bridgette's principal and explained my study to her. She later asked Bridgette if she would like to participate in the study, and Bridgette agreed. All of the teachers who participated in this research study were prekindergarten teachers who taught children from families with low social-economic status and who taught in three different educational settings.

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Collection of Data and Procedures

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The collection of data for Summerton Elementary School and Cypress Cove Head Start occurred simultaneously from September-December 2016. The

collection of data for Everest Peak Charter School occurred from January-March 2017. The collection of data for each research site followed the same procedures.

Preliminary Visit

The first visit to the site was a preliminary meeting where the teacher participants and I were able to see each other face-to-face for the first time, and begin forming a relationship with one another. The relationship I wanted to establish was one where I was the naïve learner and a non-threatening observer who was open and wanting to learn from the participating prekindergarten teacher and her environment (Glesne, 2011). At this meeting, I learned the protocols of coming and going from the school setting and the teacher's classroom. I also learned about the teacher's daily schedule and what the timeframe for my site visits would be. I outlined the procedures of the study to the teacher and checked to be sure that she was comfortable with them. I introduced the Teacher Consent Form to the teacher and reviewed it with her. After discussing the contents of the form, the teacher signed the form and I provided a copy of it to her. I explained to the teacher that her name and the name of her school site would be given a pseudonym and that I would use the teacher and site pseudonyms from that moment onward. However, rather than assign a teacher a pseudonym, I asked her if she would like to choose one. Each participating teacher chose her own pseudonym and it was by happenstance that I ended up with three pseudonyms that started with the letter 'B'. The initial meeting ended with both of us looking at our calendars and setting up a date for my first participant observation and teacher interview.

First Participant Observation and Teacher Interview

During the first participant observation visit (and subsequent visits), I arrived as the children started their day and left when they ended their day. As a participant observer, I was more an observer and less a participant (Glesne, 2011). I wrote hand-written notes in a color-coded composition notebook as I observed the teacher and her students move through their day. I wrote about the classroom setting, the classroom's daily routines, and the interactions between the teacher and her children. I wrote down any spontaneous comments or explanations the teacher offered to me, and I wrote down passages of dialogue that occurred between the teacher and her students. I made notes about what was posted on the classroom walls and how many centers were positioned within the classroom. I tracked how much time children spent eating a meal or snack, participated in circle-time, played in centers, and played outside. I observed children as they engaged in the classroom, played on the playground, ate lunch in the cafeteria, went as a group to the nurses' office for hearing and vision screening, went as a group to the library, and traveled to the gym and/or front lobby for dismissal. Employing the data collection method of a participant observer meant that I tried to capture in writing as much as I could about how the teacher structured her time and furniture in the classroom, the nature of the learning experiences she provided to children, and the nature of the interactions she had with her students.

During the first participant observation visit, I conducted the first teacher interview. Teacher interviews occurred when the teacher did not have

responsibility for children. Teacher interviews were conducted in an empty office space and/or an empty classroom when the teacher was off duty or had a planning time. Teacher interviews were recorded on a small recording device. During the first teacher interview, I began with a predetermined set of interview questions. They were:

1. How would you define or describe learning?

2. How does learning occur in your classroom?

3. What kinds of things do your children learn in your classroom?

4. What knowledge or skills are important to learn?

5. How do you know when your children have learned?

6. When knowledge or skills do you want your children to have as they move on to kindergarten?

7. Do you have any frustrations around what your children are learning or how your children are learning?

8. If you could change something in your classroom or environment, what would it be? Why?

Throughout each interview I listened carefully for any leads that I could follow that would help the teacher further articulate her thoughts around learning and teaching. Interview sessions lasted from 20 minutes to 35 minutes. At the end of the teacher interview, both of us got out our calendars and set a date for my next visit.

Second Participant Observation and Teacher Interview

During the second participant observation visit I followed the same procedures as described in the first participant observation visit. However, before settling into the classroom, I checked with the teacher to see if there were any unusual circumstances occurring during the day. (I made it a habit to check with every teacher early in the morning on every visit so that I would know in advance if there were changes to the daily schedule.) At this time, the teacher would tell me about any changes in the day's schedule--like the children going off to the nurses' office or to the library. I would also check to see if the teacher still had time to participate in a teacher interview that day. When we were all on the same page, I entered the classroom and began my observation and recording process.

During the second teacher interview, I asked the teacher to describe or define learning to me again. I repeated this question because I wanted to uncover any further nuances to the teacher's thinking around learning or changes that might have occurred in her conceptualization of learning since my last visit. During the second interview, I often asked the teacher to further describe or explain a classroom routine or learning activity that I noticed during my participant observation i.e. a re-purposed center, the advantage of using physical phonics, a truncated circle-time. This type of questioning was also an attempt to further uncover the different aspects of the teacher's conceptualization of learning and her perception and interpretation of the ecologies within her workplace environment. At the end of the second teacher interview, we got out our calendars and set a date

for the focus group activity. We discussed which of the teacher's colleagues would be attending the focus group, and I reminded the teacher that I would be video-recording this activity.

Focus Group Activity

The focus groups typically occurred in the late afternoon when the children had been dismissed from school. They occurred in the teacher's empty classroom. The largest focus group occurred in the Head Start setting and included the center's two prekindergarten teachers i.e. Laura and Betty, the family advocate (social worker), cook, and teaching assistant. Bella's focus group consisted of Bella, a prekindergarten colleague, and a first-grade teacher. Bridgette's focus group consisted of Bridgette and a kindergarten colleague. Before beginning the focus group activity, each guest chose a pseudonym and wrote it on a placard. The placards were placed in front of each participant, and everyone used each other's pseudonym throughout the focus group activity.

During the focus group, I showed a 12-minute clip (with subtitles) of a German kindergarten classroom. The video clip opens with parents walking their children down a city street into their kindergarten classroom. Children would say good bye to their parents and join into the classroom activities. The kindergarten classroom was in a building that looked like it might have been a home at one time. At one point, children painted and worked on an art project together. When the children were changing their clothes for gym class, and two children ran by the camera in their underwear. Gym class was indoors in a large room and children

walked on a balance beam and skated on brown paper. After gym class, the children put on warm coats and went outside to play in the garden. In the garden, a couple of children rode trikes while others helped the teacher move some heavy objects. When children were back in the classroom, the camera watched as two girls fought over a hairclip. They argued loudly at one another and said made some unkind comments to each other. The argument went on for a couple of minutes with no adult in sight. Eventually a teacher came over and decided she would hold onto the hairclip for a while. The two girls begrudgingly accepted the teacher holding onto the hair clip. Later in the day, children put on their coats and walked through busy city streets to a park. In the park, a number of children picked up sticks and began battling with them. The camera watched this activity for a couple of minutes, and no adult ever came into view or told the children to put down the sticks. At the end of the day parents came into the classroom to pick up their children. At dismissal time, the parents did not necessarily see the children's' teachers nor say good-bye to them. The video clip ends with parents walking their children on a busy street away from the school. I chose the video clip of the German classroom because I thought it might evoke thoughts or feelings about pedagogy, how children were viewed, and teaching practices that would be in contrast to the prekindergarten classrooms I have observed over the years.

The intent of the focus group activity was to create another forum for dialogue whereby the four prekindergarten teachers in the study could respond to the video clip and their colleague's responses, and potentially further articulate and

describe their own conceptualizations of learning. During the response portion of the focus group activity, I began the discussion by poising a predetermined set of focus group questions. Those questions were:

1. What do you like or dislike in the video clip?

2. What do you think the children are learning?

3. How is the classroom like yours? How is it different?

4. How is the teacher thinking about learning? How can you tell?

5. How does the teacher think about how children learn? How can you tell?

6. Do you see anything the teacher would like to do but seems to hold back from doing?

Throughout the discussion portion of the focus group activity, I listened carefully for any leads that would generate further questioning on my part, and generate additional responses from the focus group participants. Those additional questions were spontaneous and a function of the responses by the unique members of each focus group. The interactions and responses by the focus group participants primarily centered around the cultural differences between the German kindergarten and American kindergartens. The focus group activity, interesting as it was, did not provide me with any new information about how individual teachers thought about learning. I provide more information about the three focus groups there were conducted in my discussions in chapter 7.

Third Participant Observation and Teacher Interview

During the third participant observation visit I followed the same procedures as described in the first and second participant observation visit. I checked with the teacher about any changes in the day schedule and wrote my long-hand notes as I observed the teacher and her children move through their day.

During the third teacher interview, I asked the teacher to describe or define learning to me again. I also asked the teacher to share any thoughts she had about the focus group activity. I listened carefully to the teacher's responses looking for leads that would allow me to generate new questions about her thinking around learning and the ecologies of her workplace environment. After completing my last teacher interview and participant observation, I thanked each teacher for allowing me the opportunity to get to know them, and observe them in their classrooms.

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Data Analysis

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Transcription of Data

At the end of my data collection process, I had filled three composition notebooks with hand-written field notes, I had audio tapes of 12 teacher interviews, three video recordings of focus group activities, and over 45 artifacts or pictures of the classroom environments I observed. I transcribed my own field notes and I had a bilingual transcriber transcribe the 12 audio tapes of teacher interviews and three video recordings of the focus group activities. I chose to have a bilingual transcriber help me with the transcription of the audio and video recordings because I am monolingual and some of the participants had thick primary language accents

and/or spoke more Spanish than English. By utilizing the services of a bilingual

transcriber, I was able to read and analyze all of the participants' responses.

However, I do recognize that translations are not as good as understanding

someone in their native language. The transcription of my field notes and

audio/video recordings began in October 2016 and ended in May 2017. The analysis

of the data occurred in May-July 2017.

Figure 3.1 A Researcher's Tools for Data Collection

Data Analysis and Emerging Themes

      As I studied and analyzed my collection of data, I manually coded the

patterns and themes I saw emerging from my data set. I started by reading and

studying all of my data (transcribed field notes, transcribed audio recordings,

transcribed video recordings, and focus group transcriptions) one site at a time. I

spent a week hand-writing site-specific observations and responses onto long

streams of paper. At the end of this process, I was able to put the streams of paper

on the floor next to one another and began to see similarities and patterns emerge across all three sites. I could see the themes and patterns coalescing around the teachers' conceptualizations of learning and their responses to the ecologies of their workplace environments—which reflected my research questions. I have included a Table of Themes and Subthemes for each research question and the focus group activity.

Table 3.1

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1
Conceptualizations

Themes	Subthemes
Conceptualization of Learning	a. Children learn through teacher-directed activities b. Children learn through social, child-centered activities
Capacity of Children to Learn	a. Children can learn from one another b. Children can make choices and become independent learners c. Children learn if they have the ability to focus on the teacher
Role of Teacher	a. Teacher role-models how a classroom works b. Provide children with exploratory, social activities to discover knowledge c. Provide children with teacher-directed activities to disseminate knowledge d. Prepare children for kindergarten
Interactions with Children	a. Influenced by conceptualizations of learning, the capacity of children to learn, and the role of the teacher b. Social and academic problem-solving c. Academic problem solving and no social problem-solving

Table 3.2

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2
Ecologies of the Workplace Environment

Themes	Subthemes
State Expectations	a. High-stakes testing environment for Summerton Elementary School b. 'Met Standard' TEA rating for Summerton Elementary School c. High-stakes testing environment for Everest Peak Charter School d. 'Did Not Meet Standard' at Everest Peak Charter School e. Focus on safety at Head Start
Philosophical Approaches	a. '7 Mindsets' at Summerton Elementary b. HSELOF at Cypress Cove Head Start c. IB program at Everest Peak Elementary d. Academics are a priority e. Play is a priority
Teachers' Perceptions and Interpretations of Ecologies in Workplace Environment	a. Bella—Accepted certain ecologies and rejected other ecologies b. Laura—Struggled with certain ecologies of her workplace environment c. Betty—Accepted the ecologies of her workplace environment d. Bridgette—Accepted certain ecologies and rejected other ecologies

Table 3.3

Themes and Subthemes for Focus Group Activity

Themes	Subthemes
	Subthemes
Safety	a. Children unsafe with unsupervised freedoms b. Unsupervised freedoms build independence c. Uninterrupted social problem-solving
Classroom Environment	a. Freedom to play with sticks b. Freedom to problem-solve social conflicts c. Lack of daily schedule d. Cultural differences in conceptualizations of learning

Merriam (2002) states that that grounded theory can be built within a case study (p. 179). A grounded theory approach to the collection of data does not begin with a theory that one sets out to prove, but rather begins with an area of inquiry and then what is pertinent to that area emerges through data collection and a systematic analytic process (Merriam, 2002, p. 176). This description of a grounded theory approach to the collection of data describes how I approached the collection of data in my research study. I allowed the data to emerge and reveal its themes, subthemes and patterns, and I did not come to the project with preconceived themes or topics as I wanted the prekindergarten teachers' stories to come forth without interference from me. This was an intentional approach on my part as I

have been involved in the world of teaching and learning for a number of decades and I wanted to keep my knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints at bay.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size (*n*=4) of prekindergarten teachers. Although the teachers were forthcoming about their conceptualizations of learning and the ecologies of their workplace environment, they each came to the study with their own personal history and experiences. Because the sample size is small and I am limited in understanding the full complexities of what was behind the teachers' thinking, I cannot generalize outside the scope of this study.

Another limitation might have been my educational experiences as a teacher and administrator that span 42 years. Glesne (2011) suggests that when an individual is already familiar with a culture or group or school—one's angle of vision is narrowed by possible assumptions about what is going on (p. 41). To keep my vision from narrowing, I adopted the approach that I could only report and discuss what I had seen, heard, or witnessed—like I was a camera or a tape-recorder. In my mind, the data had to come from the teachers, not me. This strict approach was actually liberating as I kept to "just the facts" or the story the *data* were telling me. Although no human being can be completely objective, I focused on staying true to the data so patterns and themes would come from the 'ground up' and my vision would stay wide.

My monolingualism may have been a limitation. I do not speak Spanish and I used a translator to transcribe my audio and video recordings. I may have missed some nuances in meaning because I was unable to interact with some participants in their native language.

Trustworthiness

In conducting my research study, I followed a number of trustworthiness procedures to ensure that my research was credible and valid. I engaged in a prolonged engagement and persistent observation (7 months) of my selected research sites. I used multiple data-collection methods i.e. participant observation, teacher interviews, focus groups, and the collection of artifacts. I clarified my researcher bias and reflected upon my own bias and subjectivity (see limitations). I also provided rich, thick descriptions of my teachers' settings, activities and interactions so that the reader could enter the research context (Glesne, 2011). Although I did not share my data with the four participating teachers in the study, I consistently asked follow-up questions of them so I could tease-out nuances and deeper constructs about their conceptualizations of learning and their perception and interpretation of their workplace environments.

Chapter 4: Results
Setting #1: Summerton Elementary School

In this section I describe the setting at Summerton Elementary School in which Bella's classroom was situated. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written and transcribed field notes. This section includes information about the Summerton prekindergarten enclave, the campus adoption of *The 7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life* by Scott Shickler and Jeff Walker, a description of Bella's students, and a description of Bella's classroom.

The Summerton Setting

The Prekindergarten Enclave

Summerton's four prekindergarten classrooms were located at the back of Summerton Elementary and positioned within a set of portable buildings. An extensive system of metal decking connected the four prekindergarten classrooms and created a sense of an outside hallway which was used to navigate to and between the classrooms. At the entrance of the prekindergarten enclave stood a tall metal door that functioned as a gateway to the prekindergarten classrooms. The door was kept locked, and remained locked throughout the day. The prekindergarten teachers had a key to the door which allowed them to move in-and-out of the enclave at will. My coming-and-going was not so easy, and I often had to knock loudly at the door before someone would venture out of their classroom and permit me into the enclave. Bella's classroom was situated at the backend of the

enclave, and often Bella and her colleagues would gather outside her door and engage in deep conversation.

Summerton Adopts *The 7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life*

Summerton Elementary School had adopted a school-wide program of mindsets that could serve as a guideline for living one's ultimate life. The school's adopted mindsets originated from the book, *The 7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life,* by Scott Shickler and Jeff Walker. The *7 Mindsets* tenants for living life well was a nationally known program and it had been adopted by approximately 150 schools—the majority of which were located within the United States. In the Summerton's main hallway was a large bulletin board that displayed the *7 Mindsets* and children, teachers, and parents would walk past it every day.

Figure 4.1 The *7 Mindsets to Live Your Ultimate Life*	Figure 4.2 A *List of the 7 Mindsets, Chapters 3-9*
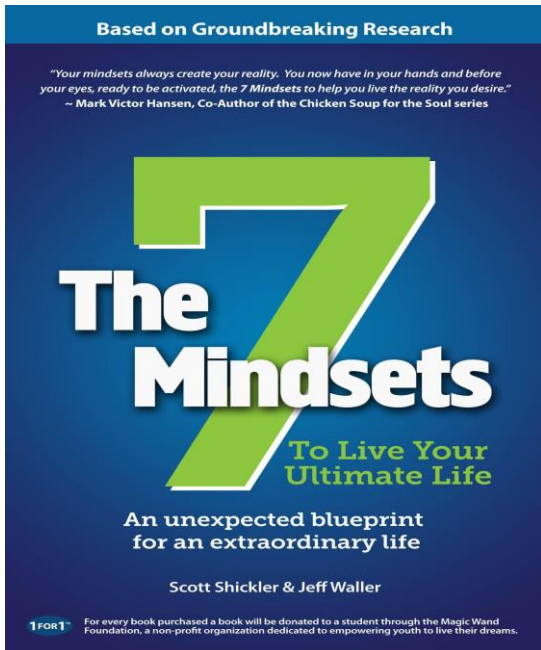
At Summerton Elementary, teachers were expected to introduce the premises of the *7 Mindsets* to their children and incorporate them into the classroom by providing children with weekly 30 to 60-minute lessons.

Bella's Students

During her day, Bella taught two groups of prekindergarten children—one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Bella's morning class was somewhat smaller (10 children) than her afternoon class (13 children). The children in both of her classes represented a balanced mixture of ethnicities—Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic. Although many of Bella's students were primarily English-speaking, many came from bilingual homes. The parents of her students chose to place their child in Bella's ESL classroom where English is the language of instruction. Although parents may have their reasons for placing an English language learner in a classroom where English is the language of instruction, research tends to find that bilingual and first language education are at least as effective as English immersion, but these approaches remain controversial (Barnett et al., 2007). Transitional bilingual education programs support maintaining a child's native language while building a solid foundation for subsequent learning and growth in English (Duran et al., 2010) but parents in Texas have the choice to refuse that type of setting for their child as well. In Bella's classroom, her teaching assistant was bilingual, and she helped build bridges between Spanish and English.

Bella's Classroom

Bella's classroom was set up to facilitate independent table work and large group activities. Appropriate-sized tables and chairs where children ate a meal or worked on independent activities took up half of the classroom floor space, and a large carpeted area designated for circle time took up the rest. Centers, or what Bella called 'work stations', were located along the perimeter of the classroom. Work stations where children were expected to engage in academic activities were well-stocked (see Artifact 1.4). More traditional early childhood centers (workstations dedicated to social-emotional interactions) appeared to be bereft of materials (see Artifact 1.3). The classroom also contained a sink and a restroom/storage closet, both of which were located at the back of the classroom.

Figure 4.3 Dramatic Play Work Station

Figure 4.4 Puzzle, ABC, Fine Motor and Block Work Station

<center>**Bella's Daily Classroom Routines**</center>

In this section I describe Bella's daily routines with her children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written and transcribed field notes. This section includes information about Bella's morning and afternoon routines, and her emphasis on providing children with math and literacy activities.

The Morning Routine

As the children entered Bella's classroom in the morning, they placed their backpacks on the back of their chair, and sat at their own personal table space— which was marked by a laminated nametag. The children removed their daily folder from their backpack and walked it over to a collection basket that sat in the literacy workstation. Once seated in their spot, children worked on individualized packets or special activities that were designed to impart academic skills i.e. unfinished sentence strips, matching numbers and colors on a laminated placemat, etc. Sometimes the morning activities were already placed at the children's table spots, and on other mornings, Bella distributed the morning packets as children entered the classroom and became seated. The children worked on their morning activities for about ½ hour, and during this time Bella weaved in-and-out of the small tables addressing their questions.

Breakfast was prepared in the school's cafeteria and was delivered to Bella's classroom at 8:30am. The children remain seated at their table spots while Bella's teaching assistant distributed the individually wrapped food items to them. A typical

breakfast included foods such as plastic-wrapped breakfast cakes or muffins, a whole apple, a carton of yogurt, and a carton of milk. The children ate breakfast for 15 minutes, and when finished, they carefully cleaned up their table spot and were called one-by-one to the back sink to deposit their trash. After completing this clean up routine, the children migrated toward the large carpet where Bella was waiting. Once all the children had gathered, Bella would lead them through a series of large group, circle time activities that began around 8:15am and lasted for an hour--and on some days--for as long as an hour and a half.

Circle Time

Bella began her morning circle time with activities that related to the calendar. The children recited the day's date, identified the color pattern of the days as they appeared on the calendar (see Artifact 1.6), and counted how many days they had been in school. To count the days, Bella would tell the children to stand and say the numbers out loud as she pointed to each crossed out day on the calendar (see Artifact 1.5). When they reached the numbers that ended in a '5'--they clapped. When they reached the numbers that ended in a '0' --they jumped up and down. Bella maintained a quick pace throughout the calendar activities, and many children could not keep in sync with her through all the clapping and jumping.

| Figure 4.5 Counting Days and | Figure 4.6 Poem and Monthly |
| Day's Objectives | Calendar |

Figure 4.5 Counting Days and Day's Objectives
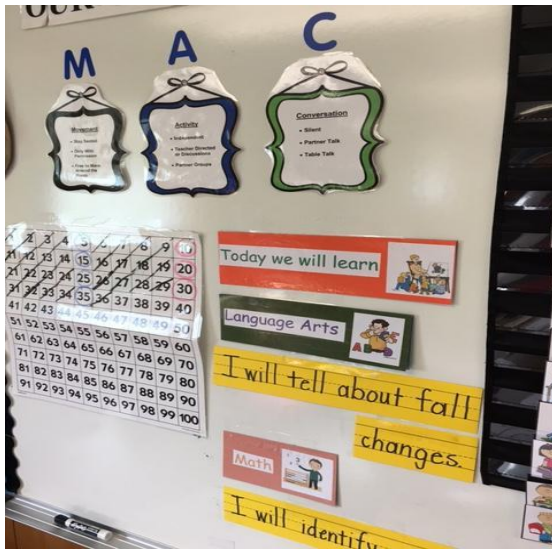
Figure 4.6 Poem and Monthly Calendar

Upon finishing with the calendar, Bella would state her objectives for the day. For instance, in the early fall she told her children, "Today I will tell you about fall changes". After stating the day's objectives, Bella would lead her children in reciting a poem that was posted above the calendar (see Artifact 1.6).

The next activity for everyone was 'physical phonics'. For physical phonics, the children had to stand and Bella would sound out words to them. As she sounded out the words, Bella modeled a series of arm movements that corresponded to the beginning, middle, and end of the word. Children would try to follow as Bella touched her shoulder, slid one hand down her opposite arm, and ended with one hand on top of the other. It was Bella's routine to conduct physical phonics every day with her children, and yet many of them could not follow her movements, and they were often out of sync with Bella's actions.

The next activity was zoo phonics and the children would continue their standing for it. In zoo phonics, each letter of the alphabet was associated with an animal. For instance, the letter 'A' was a series of long alligators that make up the shape of 'A'. The zoo letters for A through N were posted on a white board and Bella pointed to each zoo letter as everyone sang the zoo alphabet song. The letters M through Z were missing from the white board, and so the zoo alphabet song stopped at the letter N.

After zoo phonics, the children could sit down. It was now time for the day's read aloud. Bella's choice of book reflected her daily objectives. One day she read the children a book about fall changes and activities. On another day, Bella read a new and different version of *The Gingerbread Man* so children could identify how story elements might change within different versions of a story. The interactions between Bella and her children during this particular read aloud are captured in the next section on Bella's interactions with children.

Figure 4.7 *The Gingerbread Man*   Figure 4.8 *The Gingerbread Girl*
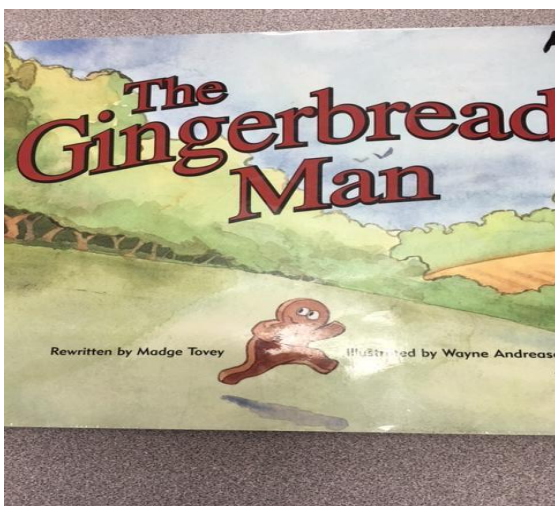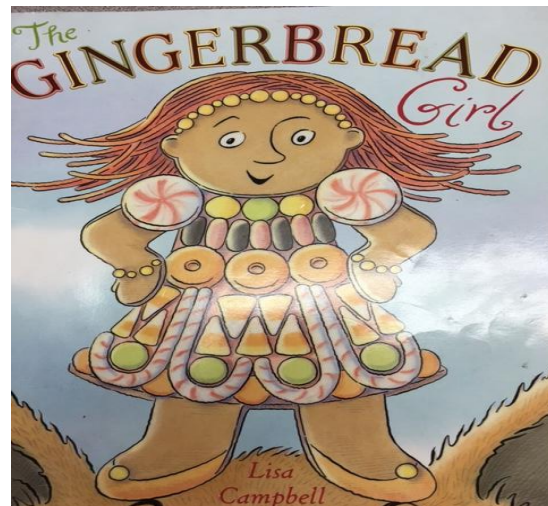
Figure 4.9 *Gingerbread Friends*   Figure 4.10 *Gingerbread Fred*
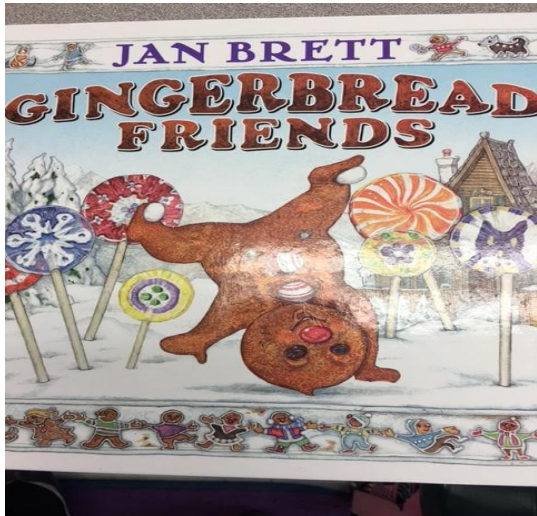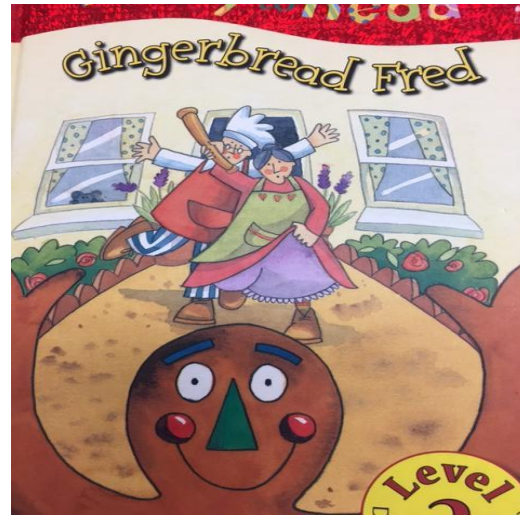
On some days after circle time, Bella kept her children on the large carpet for an additional activity, and on other days she sent them back to their table spot to work on an independent activity. On one of my visits, I observed Bella model an independent table time activity to the children as they sat on the carpet. She showed the children how to dress a paper doll in summer clothes and fall clothes, and then dismissed them to their tables so they could dress their own a doll.

On a different visit, Bella and her children remained on the large carpet for a whole-group math activity. On this day, children learned how to organize their shoes by certain characteristics and how to represent those characteristics on a graph. Bella began by telling the children to take off one shoe. Then each child had to determine if their shoe tied with a shoe string or closed with Velcro. Children placed their shoe on the graph in the appropriate column (see Artifact 1.11) and counted how many in each category.

Figure 4.11 Placing Shoes on the Shoe Graph

Recess Time and Snack Time

After circle time and when children were finished with their academic

extension activity (whether on the carpet or at their table spots), Bella's teaching

assistant would take the children outside for recess. Recess lasted for approximately

25 minutes. The children played on a large manufactured play scape that was

located between the main building and the prekindergarten enclave. During this

time, roughly 100 children played on the playground with Bella's students. The

children's teaching assistants sat in the shade on a long bench facing the playground

as the children ran and climbed. They visited with one another and/or talked on

their cell phones while they kept an eye out for the children. Occasionally a teaching

assistant would leave the bench and walk around the playground to check more

closely on how the children played with one another. After recess, and upon re-

entering the classroom, Bella's children ate a snack at their table spot.

Morning Dismissal

After snack, the morning children were dismissed at 11:00am. Children lined

up at the classroom door with their backpacks and Bella walked some of the

children through the main building to a side entrance designated for bus riders.

Bella's teaching assistant walked the remaining children to the main entrance where

they sat in the hallway and waited for a parent to pick them up. Bella and her

teaching assistant had 25 minutes of planning time before the next class arrived.

Bella's afternoon class would begin to show up at her classroom door at 11:25am.

<center>**Bella's Afternoon Routine**</center>

On most occasions, Bella repeated her morning procedures and activities

with her afternoon children. However, I did notice some variation on her part

between her morning and afternoon class. For instance, during the initial table spot

individualized activity, the afternoon children were allowed to chat more freely with

one another than were the morning children. During this time, I also noticed that

Bella was alone in the classroom (unlike in the morning) as her assistant took lunch

at this point in the day. Regardless the cause, Bella did not attend as closely to the

afternoon children and so they took the opportunity to talk and engage with one

another—something the morning children did not do. I noticed the same

phenomena occur after the children finished circle time and were dismissed back to

their table spots. Again, Bella did not interact or attend to the children with the

<center>88</center>

same intensity as she did with the morning children. Consequently, the children were freer to engage and talk to one another in a manner that the morning children were not.

Lunch and Recess

Although the daily schedule showed the same amount of time allotted to the children in the afternoon as to the children in the morning, the afternoon session felt rushed. The children still spent over an hour in circle time, but time for an extra carpet activity was actually shorter. After Bella's direct instruction was finished, her teaching assistant walked the children to the cafeteria for lunch. Children were in the cafeteria for 40 minutes, and then they were walked to the playground for recess. Recess lasted for 15 minutes (rather than 25 minutes). Back inside the classroom, the children had less than 15 minutes to play in workstations before they lined up and made the walk through the main building to catch a bus or be picked up by a parent.

<div align="center">

Bella Focused on Academics in Her Classroom

</div>

The Literacy Center

Throughout the day, Bella focused on providing her children with academic packets and activities. As a beginning morning or afternoon activity, the children worked on individualized packets at small tables. During circle time, which lasted for an hour or an hour-and-a-half, the children engaged in math, language, and literacy activities. Workstations were focused on engaging children in the academics as well. The literacy center contained books that were related to Bella's stated

objectives and had been read by Bella to the children. Bella also had story retelling

kits in the literacy workstation.

Figure 4.12
Seasonal Books
in Literacy
Workstation

Bella made her own literacy kits. She would gather the children at the literacy

workstation to role model how a new kit was to be used. Bella would show the

children how to use the Popsicle stick characters and laminated props that came

with each kit. One day I witnessed Bella showing the children how to use a literacy

kit to retell the stories *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and *Rosie's Walk.* Although there

was not enough time to actually play with the new literacy kits that day, on another

visit I saw two boys engaged with one another as they used a kit to retell the story of

The Three Billy Goats Gruff.

Figure 4.13 Retelling Story Kit:
Rosie's Walk

Figure 4.14 Retelling Story Kit:
The Three Billy Goats Gruff

Children Problem Solve in Math and Literacy

Bella provided her children with opportunities to brain storm and problem solve. She would pose a question and engage the children in discovering and organizing an answer. Bella captured her children's thinking by drawing charts or tables that reflected their answers to her questions. Bella posted these co-constructed charts in her classroom so children could visually revisit their problem-solving process.

Figure 4.15 Children Identified Scary Costumes
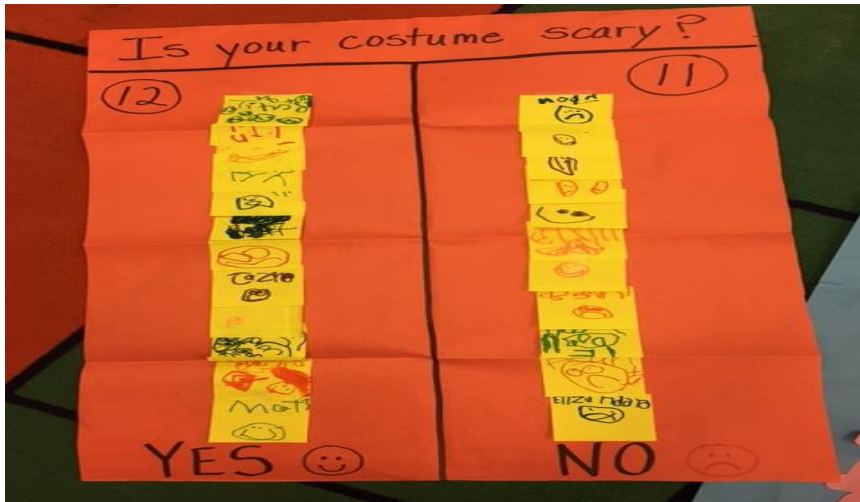
Workstation Time

Although Bella's daily schedule allowed for 45 minutes to play in

workstations, throughout my morning and afternoon classroom observations I did

not observe children playing in workstations any longer than 15 minutes. In Bella's

classroom, the workstations hugged the perimeter of the classroom. When the

children were permitted to go to workstations, they quickly went to a station of

their choice and began playing and talking to one another. The children were

allowed to move freely in-and-out of the stations and I noticed that the children did

not stay in any one station for too long but seemed in a hurry to get to the next one.

On one of my observations, and after a brief time of play, I literally heard a collective

moan escape from the children as they were told to stop playing and clean up.

<h1 style="text-align: center;">Bella's Interactions with Children</h1>

In this section I describe Bella's interactions with children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written and transcribed field notes. This section includes dialogue between Bella and her children as they discuss the story, *The Gingerbread Man*, Bella's discipline approach, and her interactions with children during a shoe graph activity.

Children Compare Different Story Versions

As part of circle time, Bella conducted a daily read aloud with the children. Bella had been teaching her children about story elements and had them comparing different versions of the story, *The Gingerbread Man*. To facilitate the comparison between story versions, Bella had constructed a story board that identified the elements of a story that she wanted the children to consider in their discussions.

Figure 4.16 Story Board with Literary Elements
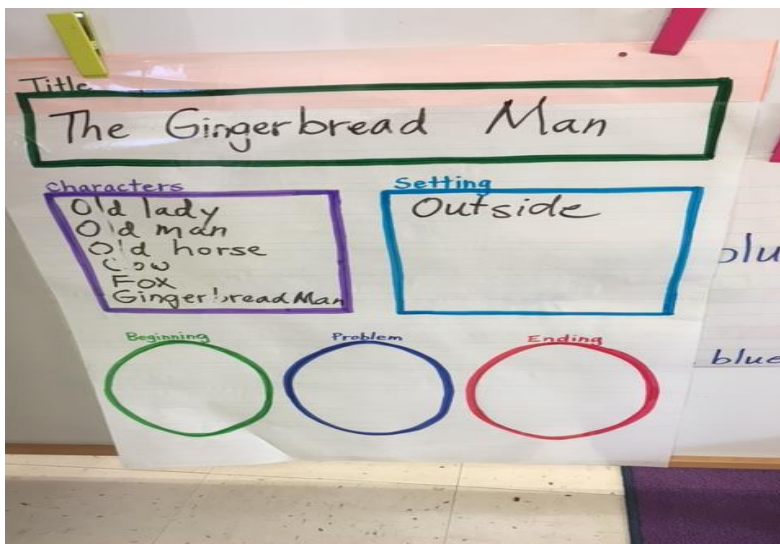
On one of my visits, Bella asked the children to compare the day's version of *The Gingerbread Man* with yesterday's version. She asked the children to tell her how the two stories differed.

Ms. B—"So far does the story seem the same?"

Child—"No."

Ms. B—"Is there an old lady and a gingerbread man running away?"

Child—"Yes."

Ms. B—"This is a butcher. Look at the picture. What is in his shop?"

Child—"Cookies".

Child—"Cake".

Ms. B—"Isn't that ham and sausage? Have you been in the HEB and seen the guys in the white coats cutting meat? What does the butcher do?"

Child—"Cuts meat!"

Ms. B—"What is a mommy pig called?'

Child—"A gingerbread."

Ms. B—"No, a sow."

In this interaction, Bella's children were unable to identify similar elements in the two versions of the *Gingerbread* stories (old lady and gingerbread man) or identify the items pictured on the cover of the present version of the story (ham and sausage). They were also unable to remember a previous vocabulary word, 'sow'. The children tried to answer Bella's questions, but seemed confused about what she was asking of them.

"How Was I Today?' Discipline

In Bella's classroom, the majority of the day was teacher-directed and the children were expected to closely follow her daily instruction and classroom rules. When she was teaching, Bella often reminded her children that it was important to focus on her. I often heard Bella say to the group, "I need everyone to look at me. Stay with me" or "Look! You need to look to learn".

So that children understood the importance of focusing, Bella had instituted a graduated system of behavior consequences that centered on a "How Was I Today?" chart. The behavior chart identified two types of acceptable behavior--Excellent Day and Good Behavior. Everyone started on Good Behavior, and if they focused well, they could move their clothespin to Excellent Day.

Figure 4.17 "How Was I Today?" Clothespin Behavior Chart

Children who could not maintain their focus during instruction time were told to get up and move their clothespin to either a first, second, or third warning spot on the chart. I often heard Bella tell a child who could stay focused to "Go get your clothespin. I can't get your attention". Bella would also remind her children that their parents would not want to see their clothespin on any warning spot. She encouraged her children to have a 'purple' or Excellent Day.

Shoe Graph Activity

On one of my visits Bella and her children constructed a shoe graph (see Artifact 1.11). In this activity children were identifying shoes that tied or closed with Velcro. Each child was instructed to take off one shoe. One-by-one children were told to place their shoe in either the 'tie' column or the 'Velcro' column. Children had to look at their own shoe and determine how it corresponded to the graph—was it closed by shoe strings or with a strip of Velcro?

On this day, Bella's children had been in circle time for an hour before they began the shoe graph activity. As the activity commenced, children started answering without raising their hand. Others began to wiggle and rock. After too many spontaneous responses, Bella asked one child, "Are you on yellow? You need to be. You have interfered twice now. Go move it." This particular child got up, walked over to the "How Was I Today?' behavior chart and moved his clothespin to yellow.

Bella's Conceptualizations

In this section I describe Bella's conceptualizations of learning. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Bella. It includes information about how Bella conceptualized learning, when she knew learning had occurred, how she conceptualized the child as a learner and the role of the teacher. It concludes with Bella's description of the knowledge and skills her children would need as they went off to kindergarten.

Learning

As part of my first interview with Bella, I asked her if she would define 'learning' for me. Bella thought about it for a moment, and then said, "Learning is to introduce new ideas and apply knowledge. It is not sequential". Bella's initial response identified three aspects within her conceptualization of learning: the introduction of new ideas, the application of knowledge, and that learning is not sequential. Bella provided more insight to her thinking around learning in subsequent interviews and during the focus group where she watched a video clip of a German kindergarten, and responded to what she saw.

During the focus group, Bella expanded on her notions around learning. She stated that teachers of young children must understand "how knowledge is relevant to the child". She talked about her experience as both a teacher of kindergarten/prekindergarten children and fourth grade students. Bella saw children as being able to acquire new ideas when those ideas resonated with some

aspect of their experience in school or the world. However, even though Bella might provide children with relatable elements when she was teaching, that did not necessarily ensure children would immediately 'acquire knowledge and be able to apply it'. It was when Bella spent one year as a fourth-grade teacher that she came to the notion that 'learning is not sequential'. Bella had a moment when she recognized that learning was not sequential for children, nor was it sequential for adults. Bella described the moment when her conceptualization of learning expanded to include the idea that learning was not sequential:

> It took me going up to 4th grade before I could put it all together. What it takes to bring it all together for a child. Reading and math are one-to-one correspondence. When they get that, they get everything.

Bella had been a kindergarten teacher for over a decade. Yet it took a new experience—one with fourth graders—before her conceptualization of learning expanded to include the idea that 'reading and math are one-to-one correspondence'. As a teacher, Bella felt it was her responsibility to help children understand the pattern of one-to-one correspondence in reading and math, in both fourth grade and in prekindergarten. When Bella's conceptualization changed, so did her role as a disseminator of knowledge, and what she expected from herself and her students.

Knowing when Learning Has Occurred

In one of later our interviews, I asked Bella how she knew learning had occurred. Her answer aligned with her earlier definition of learning that included

the aspect of applying acquired knowledge. Bella told me she knew when children

had learned something new when they could "…go help somebody else". As a

teacher, Bella watched for instances in her classroom where a child could help a

classmate acquire new knowledge. When she was able to see such an instance, she

knew the helping child had successfully learned something new.

Bella described another way in which she knew children had learned. She

stated that, "Learning brings confidence". It had been Bella's observation that when

a child acquired new knowledge, and was able to apply that knowledge, he/she

exhibited a new level of confidence. Bella could see that learning had occurred

because the child could not only help a classmate, but also demonstrated a new level

of confidence about learning.

The Child as a Learner

As part of her conceptualization of learning, Bella saw learning as a two-way

street. For Bella, learning required both a responsible adult and a responsible child.

A responsible adult would work hard at helping children acquire and apply new

knowledge. A responsible child would take ownership of his/her learning. Children

who took ownership of their learning demonstrated the attributes of "trying and

caring". Children who would try to learn, and cared about learning, could *focus* on

learning. Bella explained to me that she had some children who had the capacity to

learn, but "would not focus". The children who would not focus on learning were not

responsible learners and would experience difficulty in acquiring new knowledge.

Bella told me that there were two kinds of children. She stated, "There are gifted

kids, and other kids." For Bella, a child who was gifted could focus on learning

whereas *other* children who could not focus on learning jeopardized acquiring new

knowledge when learning opportunities were provided to them.

In her present situation, Bella was not satisfied with how children were

learning in her classroom. Bella explained that she knew children learned "at their

own pace". However, as a previous kindergarten teacher, Bella found her

prekindergarten children lacking in their skills and lagging behind in acquiring new

ones. She told me:

> Prekindergarten children are not ready for cutting and interactive writing.
>
> [My children] are stalling [on learning the letters of the alphabet] and stuck
>
> on the letters A-N.

In trying to understand her children's slow progress with learning the skills she

knows they will need in kindergarten, Bella explained to me that today's children

come to her classroom without the foundation previous children seemed to have.

She stated:

> [There is a] lack of previous experiences—children without a foundation will
>
> not succeed. This happens because of family backgrounds, lack of
>
> experiences, and teachers not teaching.

Bella talked more about the role family backgrounds have in creating successful

learners. She revealed that in her classroom, she could pick out the children who

came from families who "talk to their children and ask them questions, and those

who do not". For Bella, the lack of interaction at home between parents and their

children was a partial explanation for the slow progress her children were making in her classroom.

The Role of the Teacher

Bella conceptualized learning as a two-way street. Learning occurred best when there was a responsible teacher and a responsible student. A responsible student would focus on learning, and a responsible teacher would keep children focused on learning. I often heard Bella tell her children, "I need everyone to look at me. Stay with me" or "Look! You need to look to learn". For Bella, one of her roles as a teacher was to ensure that her children stayed focused on learning.

For Bella, another role was to demonstrate to children how a public-school classroom worked. Bella explained, "I teach them how a classroom works—literacy and math". In Bella's mind, a public prekindergarten class needed to be focused on learning literacy and math skills. Consequently, she devoted a large portion of the day to teacher-directed math and literacy activities (table packets and extended circle times) and a minor part of the day to potentially student-directed activities (workstations).

Because Bella conceptualized learning as the acquisition of new knowledge, it was her responsibility to role model new knowledge to children. However, even with her best role modeling, sometimes children were unable to learn what she was modeling. But as a responsible teacher, Bella did not give up on her children. One day I watched as her class experienced difficulty learning an AB pattern that she was modeling. She explained why she persevered with modeling the pattern:

Teachers need to model, model, and model. I thought the children had the AB pattern, but they regress. So, I keep modeling to give them a chance for trial and error.

Bella kept modeling the AB pattern so that her children would have the opportunity to persist with their learning through 'trial and error'. Bella knows that "children learn at their own pace", but she also contends that she can sense when a breakthrough is close by. Bella explained to me that she can "sense the readiness of children". Although Bella's children were 'regressing' with the AB pattern that particular day, Bella had witnessed her children being successful with the pattern the previous day. Bella sensed there was a breakthrough close by, and so she persisted with the AB pattern even though she grew more frustrated with the children as time went by.

Literacy was an important skill to be acquired by prekindergarten students, and Bella provided literacy activities to children during small table time, circle time, and workstation time. Despite her multiple efforts around literacy, Bella was mystified with her children's lack of interest in books. She used books to open up worlds to her children. Bella explained, "I teach to a higher level through books. I try to broaden and incorporate experiences in the classroom through books". Yet her children remained uninterested in books. Bella told me, "I would give them a book and they would just stare at it." Disappointing as it was that her children did not seem to be developing a love for books, Bella continued to provide her children with

a myriad of daily literacy activities. As a responsible teacher, it was her responsibility to persist in helping children learn about the value of books.

Bella viewed her role as a teacher as one where a responsible teacher persisted with providing children with the opportunity to learn despite their difficulty in acquiring new knowledge. Her conceptualization of learning included the notion that persistent modeling would eventually lead to children's understanding. Bella explained how this looked in her classroom:

> I give them a little bit of everything. They find the key by finding the parts
>
> that make sense to them--and then everything connects together and the
>
> light bulb goes off.

Bella looked forward to those moments when she saw 'everything connecting together and a light bulb going off' in the faces of her children. She was a teacher who was a consummate planner and a tireless purveyor of knowledge.

Knowledge and Skills for Future Success

As a previous kindergarten teacher, Bella had a clear sense of what children needed to learn in prekindergarten to be successful in kindergarten. Bella described the skills she wanted her children to acquire before they left her:

> [They need] vocabulary, love of books, problem solving. [They need] math,
>
> literacy, and problem solving—which is both in academics and social-
>
> emotional.

As a previous fourth grade teacher, Bella knew the importance of building a foundation in literacy, math, and problem-solving skills in her children. Because she

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knew where her children were headed, Bella provided learning activities to her children that focused on acquiring knowledge in the areas of literacy, math and (primarily) academic problem-solving.

<p style="text-align:center">How Bella Interfaced with her Workplace Ecologies</p>

In this section I describe how Bella interfaced with the ecologies of her workplace environment. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Bella. This section includes information on how Bella made decisions about what learning experiences she would provide to children and how she characterized her children as learners.

Bella Made the Decisions

Bella worked in a public-school environment that stressed the importance of student achievement on the STAAR test. Bella had first-hand knowledge of how crucial literacy and math skills would become to her children because she had spent one year as a fourth-grade teacher at Summerton Elementary. Bella had also worked many years as a kindergarten teacher and she expressed how kindergarten expectations were being pushed-down into prekindergarten. She stated, "I feel that what I am teaching now is kindergarten. [They are] bringing kindergarten knowledge and expectations down to prekindergarten". The pressure Bella felt about the push-down of academics into prekindergarten required her to make critical decisions about what learning experiences she would bring to her students. She stated:

In prekindergarten, you have ½ day. Not a lot of emphasis on social-

emotional because kids already adjusted. I need more academic because

social happens. It should happen at home. If you can't read, you can't do the

work.

Bella only had ½ day with each of her prekindergarten groups. Because of her

limited time with children, and the awareness Bella had about future academic

expectations, she made the decision to focus on the acquisition of academic

knowledge because 'If they can't read, they can't do the work'. As an early childhood

teacher, Bella was aware of the importance of the development of social-emotional

skills in her young students, but (because of time constraints) she delegated that

development to the home environment. Bella was intentional about her decision to

focus on academics in her classroom. She told me, "I make the decisions. I'm always

thinking—what do they know? Don't know? Where do I go next?" Besides her

commitment to the academics, she has made additional decisions about what she

will do in her classroom and what she will not do. For instance, the three other

prekindergarten teachers at Summerton developed a curriculum timeline that

outlined how to achieve the Texas prekindergarten guidelines within a year's time.

Bella has rejected using that timeline, and plans the activities she provides to

children based upon her own perceptions of what they need. Bella has also rejected

using the district-adopted curriculum because she has determined it was too theme-

oriented, simplistic, and not sufficiently academically-oriented. Another outside

influence rejected by Bella was the use any of the tenants of the *7 Mindsets* in her

classroom. In Bella's mind, she does not have time for the *7 Mindsets* because of the importance to her children that they build an academic foundation for future grades.

The Capacity of the Child for Learning

Bella's conceptualization of the learner was closely associated to her conceptualization of learning. Bella experienced frustration with the pace of learning in her classroom when children did not demonstrate the characteristics of a responsible learner—caring and trying. Bella's conceptualization of the learner required more than the behaviors of caring and learning, she wanted her students to enter her classroom with a can-do mindset. A can-do mindset would have her children being confident of their learning ability. The development of a can-do mindset began at home. Bella explained:

Mindsets come from the family. They [children] don't have a mindset of *I can*. So, I make it so they always feel successful. Our society is babying children too much. They don't grow into independent people.

Bella's conceptualization of learning, and her conceptualization of the learner, required children be responsible for their learning. When her children did not demonstrate a responsible can-do mindset toward learning, Bella experienced tensions about the ability of her children (gifted children focus, others do not) and their potentiality for future success in subsequent grades (you have to read to do the work). Bella indicated that she saw the lack of interest in developing a mindset for learning as a larger societal issue. She explained how academics could make or break a child's life:

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Knowledge in America—We have a social problem as well as an academic

problem. Socially you figure it out as you grow up. But you really need

academics to live, to get a job, and take care of your family.

The nation's disregard for the importance of academics was not bound by a family's

income level. Bella saw parents from both high and low-income households

disregarding knowledge and sending unprepared children to school. Bella stated:

[I am] not seeing a rise in education or knowledge order in both high and low

socio-economic families. Both high and low [socio-economic families] are not

interested in reading and they don't have a work ethic or interest.

Families who did not help their children develop mind-sets for learning before they

entered prekindergarten created stress for Bella—she worried about the slow pace

of acquiring knowledge in her classroom. How could Bella keep learning moving if

half of the equation for learning (a responsible student) was coming to her

classroom unprepared and ill-equipped with a mindset for learning?

Summerton Focus Group

In this section I describe some of the interchanges that occurred between

three teachers at the Summerton focus group activity. The data came from the

transcription of the video-taped recording of the focus group. The teachers who

participated in the focus group were Bella and two of her colleagues—Claire, a

prekindergarten teacher, and Luna, a first-grade teacher. All of the teachers'

responses to the three focus group activities will be discussed in Chapter 7.

During the focus group discussion about the German kindergarten, Bella identified an aspect of the European kindergarten that she liked--children being allowed to demonstrate their free will. Bella said, "Children [were] independent, had free will, explored on their own, created on their own and [acquired] new ideas without teacher guidance". I was surprised that Bella liked the independent environment of the German kindergarten, and it made me wonder how much the ecology of her setting affected her conceptualizations of learning. Claire was also struck by the independent learning environment in the German video clip. She contrasted the freedoms she saw in the German kindergarten with a lack of the same latitudes within her classroom. She said, "It would never happen [in her school setting]—playing with sticks, [children] with their clothes off, and walking to the park." In America, and in her educational setting, Claire knew that she could not allow her children to play with sticks, take their clothes off, or walk to a park. Claire saw that the German teachers had a "free-range to go into different areas". Because the German teachers were permitted a free range, they could allow children to explore and interact with one another in ways Claire's educational setting--with a focus on academics--would not allow. Claire seemed to question the wisdom of the ecology of her public-school setting when she posed the question:

> Are we shoving academics down their throats? I'm the opposite. I just feel that without social skills--your interaction and ability to function in a classroom and around people--I don't think the [academic] learning gets 'in there'. Letters will come.

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Claire's comment seemed to challenge the ecology of her setting that prioritized academic knowledge over social-emotional development. Luna followed-up with a description of what her classroom would look like if she had free range to teach. She said, "If I had free range and flexibility, social skills would be in more depth in my classroom". Luna had found that children without well-developed social-emotional skills actually took her away from the academics because they interrupted her instruction with their needs. Luna described some of the skills children lacked:

> Not many kids have gone to prekindergarten so they don't know how to grasp a pencil or how to go to the bathroom. They don't know what to do when they have rocks in their socks.

It takes time away from the academics to help a child understand that to get the rocks out of his socks-- he needs to take his shoes off.

> Luna recalled a time when there was less pressure on bringing academics to children and more of an acceptance in socializing with them. In a previous time, the relationship between teacher and child was different. Luna explained:

> I feel like the relationship between the teacher and the student has changed a lot. When I was a kid, teachers were like my parents. Now there is a limit, a line that is drawn. Based on the requirements that the school is asking you to do--it limits those social moments.

Luna was describing an educational setting that used to be more social and now was being influenced by the school's academic expectations. Claire picked up this line of thought and addressed how this new, less social classroom environment impacted

the role of the teacher. She said, "[It's] kind of like a boundary thing. When I'm at school, I'm your teacher. I'm going to have sympathy for you and I'll console you, but there's a line there". For Claire, a teacher could be sympathetic but must not cross the boundary into being parental. Bella seemed to agree with Claire's appraisal of the newer role of the early childhood teacher. She said, "I feel like those [German] teachers acted like moms and grandmas—bouncing [children] on their knees, brushing teeth". The ecology of their public-school setting did not allow Bella, Claire, and Luna to act overly parental toward children. A school environment that drew a line between being a teacher or being parental also generated fear around the possibility of litigation. Claire explained that "Because of repercussions, [you] don't put a kid on your lap. It's inappropriate." Luna added, "Well, we have to check for liability now, it's a shame." The role of the early childhood teacher had changed—teachers were expected to be academic instructors and not sympathizing parental figures.

Despite the restrictions the school environment placed upon teachers, Luna questioned giving up a more social role with children. She asked, "Where do we find that balance of being mom or grandma in our classrooms? As teachers, [we] need that balance but it's hard when school is ½ day". Luna worried about the disappearing socialness between the early childhood teacher and her young students. Luna worried for her daughter who would soon be entering a public school prekindergarten class. She wondered what her daughter would think of school when her personal freedoms were short-tailed. Luna asked:

Being a parent and a teacher, I feel like I am taking her childhood already.

What will it be for her when she steps into the classroom—instead of

exploring and creating and having free will?

Luna wondered what the ramifications might be for her daughter when learning

was not about exploring, creating, and free will. What would happen to her daughter

when she had to enter a classroom like her mother's?

Bella, the Data, and the Research Questions

In this section I consider all the data I collected about Bella and answer the

two research questions posited within this ethnographic case study. The two

research questions were an exploration into how four prekindergarten teachers

articulated their conceptualizations of learning, and how their conceptualizations

interfaced with the ecologies of their workplace environment. In this section

I describe Bella's conceptualizations of learning and how her conceptualizations

interfaced with her perceptions and interpretations of the ecologies of her

workplace environment.

Research Question #1: Bella's Conceptualizations

Bella conceptualized learning as the acquisition of new ideas and the

application of knowledge. For Bella, the acquisition of new ideas meant the

acquisition of academic ideas—particularly the academic ideas of math and literacy.

Bella saw the source of academic knowledge, and the transmittal of academic

knowledge, as stemming primarily from herself. Here Bella's conceptualization of

learning was intertwined with her role of a teacher (disseminator of knowledge)

and her children's capacity for learning (children learn from Bella). These three constructs—her conceptualization of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher--were strongly linked to one another, and they influenced the learning experiences Bella provided to children and the nature of the interactions in her classroom.

The children in Bella's classroom experienced primarily teacher-directed activities throughout the day. Whether in the morning or afternoon, the day began with an individualized packet of math or literacy activities that children had to focus on while they worked at a small table. During circle time, Bella led the children through a long series of routine daily activities designed to build a foundation in literacy and math i.e. counting days, zoo phonics, physical phonics, and comparing different versions of a story etc. Children were expected to focus on Bella's circle-time instruction for long periods of time. Also, during the time children worked independently at small tables--they were expected to focus on a given task with a minimum of peer-to-peer conversation. When children were given time to socialize, it was during workstation time. Workstation time was very short and the content in the different work stations was academically-oriented.

Bella conceptualized learning as an equal partnership between the teacher and the student. Learning required a responsible adult and a responsible student. A responsible teacher was one who role-modeled and did not give up on her children. A responsible student was a child who demonstrated a willingness to try and to care about learning. A child who demonstrated a willingness to try and care was a student who had the ability to focus on learning. Bella would grow impatient with

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children who could not stay focused or interrupted her instruction once too often. She would tell her unfocused children to 'stay focused, look to learn'. If children persisted in enacting unfocused behavior, they were told to go move their clothespin and to try to have a 'purple' day tomorrow.

Bella's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher were intertwined and influenced the learning activities she provided to children and the interactions she had with them in her classroom. Bella conceptualized learning as the acquisition of knowledge, the learner as a passive receiver of knowledge, and her role as a teacher as a disseminator of knowledge. Consequently, she provided children with primarily teacher-directed activities that required long periods of their attention. When children did not meet her expectations for learning, she was brisk, impatient, and told children to move their clothespin and have a better day.

Research Question #2: Bella's Conceptualizations and her Workplace Ecologies

Bella worked in a public-school prekindergarten classroom and was one of four prekindergarten teachers in her elementary school. At the time of my study, Summerton Elementary School had a "Met Standard" rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). However, Bella was focused on providing her young children with a solid base of academic knowledge to the point that she did not provide her children with much time to engage in social-emotion activities. Adair et al. (2017) found that "when classrooms are too rigid, controlled, and task-driven, students cannot initiate and continue conversations with their peers" (p. 327).

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Bella's task-driven classroom environment was controlled and directed by her, and children in her classroom were not given much latitude to initiate conversation with their peers. Bella explained that her experience as a fourth-grade teacher opened her eyes to how important academic skills would be to her children as they left her. She stated that prekindergarten was more like kindergarten used to be. The "push-down" of academics from kindergarten into prekindergarten that Bella was experiencing was a phenomenon that appeared to be occurring across the country. Due to the high-stakes testing and accountability movement found within the public-school system, kindergarten curriculum was being "pushed-down" into prekindergarten (Moloney, 2010; Brown, 2010; Goldstein, 2008). In her situation, Bella was dealing with two ecological pressures—the "push-down" of academics and a time constraint as her prekindergarten sessions were only half a day. Early childhood teachers who found themselves in such a situation were also challenged to provide children with developmentally appropriate practices that included time for socialization (Brown & Feger, 2010; Baumi, 2016; Brown & Lee, 2012). Bella's conceptualizations of learning aligned with her school's ecology that focused on children being prepared for future STAAR testing. Bella's conceptualizations of learning were the impetus for other decisions she made as well.

Bella's prekindergarten colleagues had developed a curriculum timeline that outlined how to teach the prekindergarten TEKS in one year. Bella rejected using that timeline, and instead adopted physical learning strategies that were designed to help four-year olds develop literacy and math skills i.e. zoo phonics, physical

phonics, and workstations instead of centers. Bella also rejected using the district-adopted curriculum because it was too theme-based and not academic enough. Instead, Bella designed her own lessons around literacy and math that were provided to children during circle-time and as independent work packets. Bella conceptualized learning as the acquisition of academic knowledge, and so she rejected timelines and curriculum that did not align with her thinking about what children should learn and how they *could* learn.

Summerton Elementary School had adopted a school-wide program around the book, *The Seven Mindsets: To Live Your Ultimate Life*, by Shickler and Waller. Teachers were expected to provide children with knowledge about the *7 Mindsets* through weekly lessons. Bella rejected providing those lessons to her children and focused on academics instead. Bella explained to me that she made the decisions about her classroom. She stated, "I make the decisions. I'm always thinking—what do they know? Don't know? Where do I go next?" Teachers who make decisions about what they will bring to children is not new. Goldstein (2008) states, "What children have the opportunity to learn depends ultimately on what their teachers make available to them" (p. 460). Bella made her decision to reject the *7 Mindsets* because it did not align with how she conceptualized learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher. Bella's decision-making was not unique. Baumi (2016) found that teachers working in an atmosphere of high-stakes testing took calculated risks and stepped away from mandated structures. They took such risks because they felt the

changes would promote student learning, make strategic use of class time, and fill in the gaps between curriculum and achievement tests.

The close alignment between Bella's conceptualizations of learning and her school's focus on academics allowed Bella to accept the high-stakes testing ecology of her setting. It also allowed Bella to reject district and campus-based initiatives that did not align with her conceptualizations. Bella's conceptualizations of learning were well-entrenched, and they influenced how she responded to the various ecologies in her workplace environment. In my time observing and interviewing Bella, I did not witness a moment when her workplace ecologies challenged or changed her conceptualizations of learning, the learner, or her role as a teacher.

Chapter 5: Results
Setting #2: Cypress Cove Head Start

Cypress Cove Head Start Setting

In the opening section of this chapter I describe the setting at the Cypress Cove Head Start in which Laura and Betty's classroom was situated. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written and transcribed field notes. This introductory section includes information about the Head Start setting and classroom. It introduces the two Head Start teachers: Laura and Betty. It includes information about the Head Start practice of serving family-style meals, and describes the Head Start educational framework that serves as a guide to Head Start classrooms across the nation.

The Cypress Cove Classroom

The Cypress Cove Head Start portable building was situated in the backyard of a public elementary school which was located nearby a large, central Texas city. The Head Start classroom was part of the Cypress Cove Elementary School campus. Cypress Cove Elementary School provided children with only ½ day of kindergarten. By partnering with Head Start, children could be provided with a full day of services. Children attended a ½ day public-school prekindergarten session and ½ day of a Head Start prekindergarten session. In Head Start, this service model was known as a 'flip-flop' model. Children who started the morning in a Head Start classroom 'flip-flopped' into a public classroom in the afternoon. Children who started in a public classroom in the morning 'flip-flopped' into the Head Start classroom in the afternoon. The partnership between the school district and Head Start was possible

because children who participated in Head Start, and in the district prekindergarten program, met both organizations' federal poverty eligibility guidelines.

The Head Start classroom was located in a large grey portable building. It had a gracious front porch that was made from metal decking. The metal deck contained child-size, built-in benches and was covered from the sun by an awning. On a rainy day, instead of children playing on the playground located behind their classroom, they played on the front deck. From the front deck, two doors allowed access into the spacious classroom. The portable that housed the prekindergarten classroom also housed a Head Start administrative office, a large conference room, an adult restroom, and a kitchen.

The Head Start classroom contained a number of large windows that lined the front and back of the classroom. These windows allowed natural light to flow into the classroom and provided teachers and children with a view of the front deck and the back playground.

Figure 5.2 View of the Front Deck

In the middle of the Head Start classroom were four child-sized tables. These tables were used throughout the day for mealtimes--and during center time functioned as play spaces. A large carpet was located at the back of the classroom and it was the gathering spot for circle time. The perimeter of the classroom contained a number of centers which were inviting and well-stocked. The centers included a dramatic play area, a center for math and science, a technology corner, a literacy center complete with a couch, a sensory table, a Logo table, a puzzle table, a block center, and an art center with a child's easel.

In the back of the classroom were two restrooms-- one for girls and one for boys. Nestled between the two restrooms were a boy's sink and a girl's sink that the children used to wash their hands. A third sink was located off to the side from the girl's restroom, and it was used to mix paints, wash dishes, and rinse out toothbrushes.

Two Head Start Teachers: Laura and Betty

The Cypress Cove Head Start program had two prekindergarten teachers who used the same classroom at different times during the day. Laura taught the morning prekindergarten class and Betty taught the afternoon class. While Laura taught the morning children, Betty fulfilled her duties in the center's administrative office as center director. While Betty taught the afternoon children, Laura planned lessons and gathered together materials to re-fresh the centers i.e. the drama center was re-designed to be a camping ground. Within the Head Start portable building, Laura, Betty, the teaching assistant, the cook, and the family advocate (social

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worker) were bilingual. Throughout the day, both the cook and family advocate would come in-and-out of the morning class and the afternoon class to help with meals, staff breaks, and nap time.

Head Start Family-Style Meals

Head Start Performance Standards (#1302.44) required that children who attended a Head Start prekindergarten be provided with meals that met a half-2/3rds of the child's daily nutritional needs (p. 37). Consequently, a full-time cook prepared the children's breakfast, lunch, and snack on site. The cook would bring the food from the kitchen in large bowls and place them on the small tables. Children dined family-style which meant that they sat together in the company of an adult, and served themselves by using long-handled serving spoons. Children poured their own water or milk from pitchers into plastic cups. If a spilled occurred, the child would help clean it up with support from the adult. Throughout the meal, the conversation among the children and the seated adult (teacher, teaching assistant, social worker and/or the cook) was lively and consistent. Conversation ranged from a family or classroom experience to the nutritional value of the food they were consuming. Upon finishing a meal or snack, children cleaned up by taking their dishes to the back sink. Children with the job of 'table-helper' helped wipe down the tables, and when tables were cleaned and chairs pushed in, children were ready for the next activity.

Cypress Cove Followed a Head Start Educational Framework

In September of 2016, the Office of Head Start (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) adopted a new set of standards known as the *Head Start Program Performance Standards.* This new set of standards re-defined the Head Start comprehensive service model and provided Head Starts across the country with new directions and regulations. Within the new performance standards was an educational model, the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* (HSELOF) that drove the national educational experience for Head Start teachers and children.

Figure 5.1 *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five*

CENTRAL DOMAINS				
APPROACHES TO LEARNING	SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT	LANGUAGE AND LITERACY	COGNITION	PERCEPTUAL, MOTOR, AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT
▲ INFANT/ TODDLER DOMAINS — Approaches to Learning	Social and Emotional Development	Language and Communication	Cognition	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
● PRESCHOOLER DOMAINS — Approaches to Learning	Social and Emotional Development	Language and Communication	Mathematics Development	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
		Literacy	Scientific Reasoning	

All educational products (curricula, child screening tools and/or child assessment systems) adopted by a Head Start program had to be research-based and aligned to the HSELOF. The HSELOF was the national driving force behind what Head Start teachers were supposed to teach and the nature of the experiences they were expected to provide to children.

The *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* described five central domains that served as the developmental areas teachers were to consider when planning educational activities for children in the classroom. Each of these five domains were considered critical in helping children become school ready. The *Approaches to Learning* domain emphasized creating a learning environment that nourished the child's independence, curiosity, and an internal love for learning. The *Social-Emotional* domain focused on helping children regulate their emotions and behavior. The domain of *Cognition* centered on helping children become thinkers and included the academic subjects of math and science. The domain of *Language and Literacy* emphasized children becoming literate, and the *Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development* domain focused on the development of children's gross and fine motor skills.

An additional document that further identified the Head Start approach to education was the list of HSELOF *Early Learning Principles*. This document described the nature of the child learner, the nature of learning, and the nature of the classroom experience. The seven HSELOF *Early Learning Principles* were:

1. Each child is unique and can succeed.

2. Learning occurs within the context of relationships.

3. Families are children's first and most important caregivers, teachers, and advocates.

4. Children learn best when they are emotionally and physically safe and secure.

5. Areas of development are integrated, and children learn many concepts and skills at the same time.

6. Teaching must be intentional and focused on how children learn and grow.

7. Every child has diverse strengths rooted in their family's culture, background, language, and beliefs.

The *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* and the list of *Early Learning Principles* were national guidelines provided to the Cypress Cove Head Start teachers—guidelines that were intended to frame the educational experiences and interactions within their classroom. Although the HSELOF included the domains of literacy, math, and science, the primary focus of Head Start was to help children become 'school ready' (*Head Start Performance Standards*, 2016). Children who were 'school ready' would enter kindergarten with the social-emotional skills, cognitive abilities, and approaches to learning (HSELOF *Framework*) that were needed to make a successful transition to a public-school classroom. However, helping children become 'school ready' was not the only focus in a Head Start program—parents were important as well.

Head Start has a two-pronged approach to early childhood education. Head Start teachers are not only to help children become school ready, but they are also expected to encourage parents to become engaged in their child's education (*Head Start Performance Standards*, 2016). Part of the role of a Head Start teacher was to help families feel comfortable within the school setting and encourage parents to

become knowledgeable about how a public-school works. In Head Start programs, parents were seen as a vital component to their children's future success in school.

Laura's Daily Morning Routines

In this section I describe Laura's daily routines with her children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written field notes. This section includes information about Laura's students, her daily routines, and the children's weekly jobs. It describes Laura's circle time, center time, and outside activities. It also includes information about the children's snack time and their transition to the public-school prekindergarten classroom. It concludes with a description of Laura's 'vanishing' circle time.

Laura's Students

Laura's morning group of prekindergarten children consisted of nine children. Although her total student body represented a number of ethnicities--Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic—two-thirds of her children were primarily Spanish-speaking.

Breakfast and Tooth Brushing

Laura's day began with children gathering at small tables to have breakfast. A typical breakfast, put together by the on-site cook, included food items such as homemade oatmeal in a bowl, peaches in a bowl, and a pitcher of milk. Laura, her teaching assistant, and the cook would sit with the children and engage in a lively conversation with them. Breakfast lasted about a half hour, and at its conclusion,

children migrated to the back of the room to use the girl's and boy's restroom and wash their hands.

Before the children would return to their tables, they went to the third sink to pick-up their personal toothbrush and a paper cup that had a small dab of toothpaste attached to its lip. Once everyone was seated at the small tables, Laura would lead the children in singing the 'toothbrush song' and she role modeled the brushing of teeth. The children followed her as she brushed her teeth outside-inside-behind-and-back. A large poster hung on a book case and served as a visual reminder to the children of how to appropriately brush their teeth.

Figure 5.3 *How to Brush* Poster

At the end of tooth brushing, the teaching assistant called the children one-by-one to the back sink. She took each child's toothbrush, cleaned and rinsed it, and then

placed it on an open rack to dry. Children dumped their paper cups into the trash and headed over to the large carpet for circle time.

Circle Time and Weekly Jobs

Laura would sit in a chair as her children gathered in a semi-circle and sat down on the large carpet. Circle time was an opportunity for learning and for demonstrating one's weekly jobs. Circle time opened with the daily-greeter putting on the official 'daily greeter apron'. As everyone sang the morning song, the daily-greeter moved from child-to-child officially greeting all his classmates. Children chose the manner in which they wanted to be greeted. Greetings included a high five, a handshake, a smile, a hug, or hands that fluttered like butterflies. After all the children had been individually greeted, the daily greeter slipped out of his apron and sat back down on the carpet.

Figure 5.4 All Children Had a Weekly Job

Two stick figures for each job represented AM and PM children.

The next circle time activity was interacting with the *Circle Time Center* Poster. The children would shift their positions on the carpet to look at a large vinyl poster that hung on the wall just to the right of center. Activity with the poster could not begin until Laura called for her circle-time helper. Laura held small cards, and as she finished using them, the circle-time helper would place the cards in pockets on the poster. With her children, Laura identified the day's date, the days of the week, a particular letter, color and shape. The last interaction with the blue vinyl poster was the circle-time helper placing paper gumballs on the 'Let's Count' gumball machine. Laura and all of her students would count out loud as each one of the gumballs were placed inside the gumball machine.

Figure 5.5 Blue Vinyl *Circle Time Center* Poster
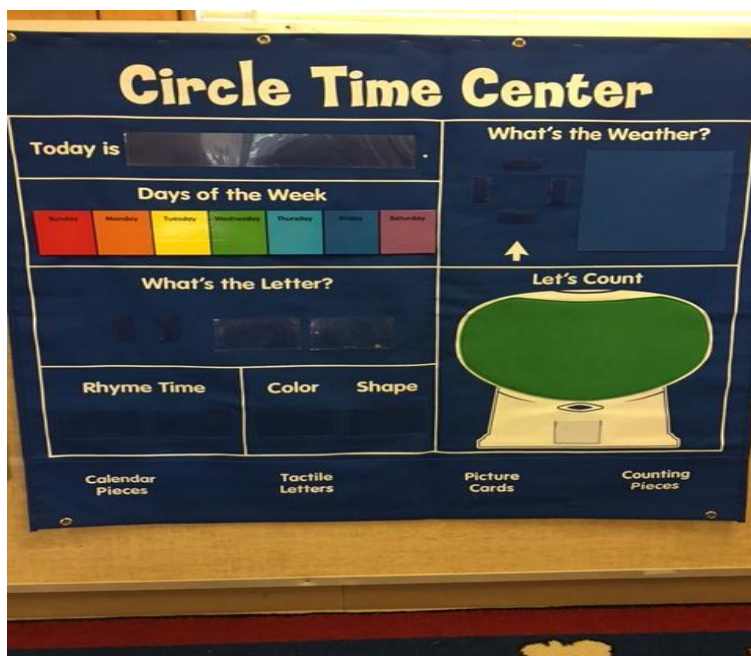
After concluding the gumball activity, Laura's circle-time helper sat down. Laura would now call for her weather helper. The weather helper went up to the *Circle*

Time Center poster and spun a wheel that would (eventually) land on the day's weather condition i.e. cloudy, sunny, windy, or rainy. After the day's weather was finally identified, the weather helper sat back down. Next, Laura called for her alphabet-helper. Laura handed a pointing stick to her alphabet helper and he/she would point to a letter as the whole class sang the *Alphabet Song.*

After the *Alphabet Song*, the *Circle Time Center* activities were finished and children stood up. They sang a song in English, and then they sang the same song in Spanish. After singing, the children would sit down and Laura called forth her center name-card helper. Laura handed this helper a stack of name cards. As the center name-card helper handed out name cards to her/his classmates, the children wandered off to a center of their choosing. Laura's morning circle time lasted approximately ½ hour.

Center Time

During center time, children moved freely throughout the room and flowed from center-to-center at will. There were many centers to choose from. In one center, children played with puzzles, play dough, or a Mr. Potato Head. Another center was for art and children cut with scissors, colored with crayons or markers, and pasted construction paper projects together. A nearby easel allowed children to use water colors to paint pictures.

Children seemed particularly drawn to their dramatic play center. In the dramatic play center, the kitchen furniture had been turned around and a campground had been constructed for children to explore. Within this space was a

large piece of wooden furniture that contained an upstairs landing and an under-the-stairs open cubby hole. The under-the-stairs cubby hole had been repurposed into a tent. Children would crawl into this space and lie on 'sleeping bags' which were in actuality green plastic lounge chairs. While children were in the tent, they read books to themselves and their friends. In the middle of the camping center, a campfire had been constructed. The campfire logs were real wood, and red and orange tissue paper mimicked flames. Although the children had not been instructed how to play in the camping center, Laura witnessed the children spontaneously placing bowls of food on the campfire so they could cook their food and have a meal.

Figure 5.6 Cooking in Camping Center   Figure 5.7 Under-the-Stairs Tent

The children ebbed and flowed in-and-out of the many well-stocked centers for roughly one hour. They freely played with their classmates and chatted none-

stop with one another. As center time came to a close, the children picked-up toys

and materials and placed them back into the shelves in an orderly fashion.

A Second Circle Time

After center time, the children re-convened on the large carpet with Laura.

During this short circle time, Laura would read a book to her children. Laura did not

read the text in the book to the children. She would 'read' the book by pointing to

the pictures and asking the children what they saw happening on each page. As

Laura leafed through a book, she asked the children questions about what they were

seeing in both Spanish and English. [*Laura later explained to me that her Education*

Director had instructed all teachers not to read the text in books to children anymore.

The Education Director thought children were too fidgety during read-alouds, and so

she instructed teachers to 'walk' the children through the story by pointing to the

pictures and asking them what they were seeing.]

On a different day, I observed Laura using her second circle time for journal

writing instead of reading a book by leafing through it. Before journal time could

begin, Laura asked for her journal-writer helper to come forward. The journal-

writer helper distributed journals to all of the children while they sat on the carpet.

After receiving their journal, the children began to sprawl on the carpet, lying on

their stomachs or lying on their sides, as they wrote in their journals. After about 10

minutes of writing, the journal-writer helper collected the journals from the

children and gave them back to Laura. The children stood up because it was time to

go to the playground.

Outdoor Activities

As her children began to migrate to the front door, Laura called for her line-leader helper to take his/her place at the front of the line and her door-holder helper to take his/her place at the front door. The children lined up single-file at the door, and those children who needed to go to the restroom before lining up quickly did so. The door-holder helper held the door open as the line-leader helper led the children out to the front deck, around the portable, and to the back yard where the playground was located.

The children's playground was situated in a large field that was fenced-in. Half of the space was dedicated to a large play structure that contained a slide, a number of swings, climbing ropes, and structures to climb through. The other half of the field contained a large oval trike track, an open pergola, and a picnic table that sat under a large shade tree. Children and teachers would spontaneously gather at the picnic table, socialize, and then move on to another activity.

For the first ten minutes on the playground, Laura and her teaching assistant played a game together with the children. On one day, it was a wooden toss game where children tossed rope rings onto spaces marked with the letters of the alphabet.

Children stayed on the playground with two adults for 45-50 minutes. During the time outside, the adults continually moved throughout the playground and engaged with the children as they played. At one point, everyone gathered by the play scape to drink water in paper cups. At the end of recess, children helped the

teaching assistant put away their toys in a metal shed. The line-leader helper led the children back around the portable to the front door. The door-holder helper held the door while all the children walked in line back into the classroom.

Snack Time

After entering the classroom, children used the restroom and washed their hands. They meandered back to the small tables where the cook had already placed their snack. On each table sat a pitcher of milk, a bowl of raisins, a bowl of carrots, and a very large bottle of Ranch dressing. Children served themselves raisins and carrots, poured milk into their cups, and maneuvered the large bottle of salad dressing without incident. After snack, the children grabbed their backpacks and the cook took a small group of children to the front of the school where they caught a school bus back to their 'home' school. The remaining children lined-up at the front door for their walk to the school and their afternoon class in a public prekindergarten.

The Children Flip-Flop Classrooms

The flip-flop transition was a fairly long one: 20-25 minutes. The teaching assistant walked the morning children to the front of the elementary building where the children sat down on the sidewalk to wait for the morning public school children to appear at the locked door. They usually waited for ten minutes or more. When the elementary prekindergarten class finally appeared at the door, the teachers switched children. The afternoon group then walked with the teaching assistant to the portable classroom where Betty would be waiting for them.

The Vanishing Circle Time

During my third observation of the Cypress Cove Head Start classroom, I noticed that the blue vinyl *Circle Time Center* poster was missing from the wall in the children's large carpeted circle time space. Without the poster, Laura's circle time was considerably shorter than previous ones. Her circle time activities seemed to be limited to singing the *Alphabet Song* and a few additional songs in English and Spanish. After the children went off to play in centers, I asked Laura about the missing poster. She explained that the Head Start Education Director had decided that the poster's circle time activities should be a choice for children, and not an activity that children *had* to sit through. The Head Start teachers had been directed to re-position the vinyl *Circle Time Center* poster in a center. Teachers had also been directed to keep their circle time activities brief so children could spend more time playing in centers.

Figure 5.8 The *Circle Time Center* Poster in the New ABC Center

Laura had re-positioned the *Circle Time Center* poster to the upstairs landing of an unused large, wooden piece of furniture. The new center was named the 'ABC Center' and children reached it by climbing up a ladder. As the day progressed, I watched children play in the new ABC Center. A child would pretend to be the teacher while other children played the role of student. Children placed cards into the poster, spun for the weather, and counted out gumballs. The children flowed in-and-out of the center and it appeared to be quite popular.

Laura's Interactions with Children

In this section I describe Laura's interactions with children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written field notes. This section describes Laura's interactions with children during circle time, center time, and on the playground.

Circle Time Interactions

Laura continually engaged with her students throughout the day. During her circle time daily routine with the weather, calendar, and counting gumballs, she interacted with children by smiling, calling upon her weekly helpers to assist her, and asking the children simple questions. For instance, one day during her second circle time, Laura was reviewing the parts of a tree with her children. She drew a quick sketch of a tree on the white board and asked the children to identify the parts of the tree as she pointed to them.

T—"Do you know the parts of a tree?"

T—"Nancy (pseudonym), can you tell me what part of the tree this is?"

N- "Leaves."

Laura continued asking the children to identify the parts of the tree and labeled the parts as children named them.

T--"What are these again?"

C.—"Leaves."

Laura's questions about the parts of a tree were simple identification questions and her children could easily and correctly answer them.

Center Time Interactions

Laura engaged with her children as they played in centers by moving in-and-out of the centers herself. She would ask the children questions about what they were doing, and often re-directed a child's behavior if it was incongruent to harmonious play with others. On one day, I observed Laura as she re-directed a student who did not want to honor reserving a spot in the computer center by placing his nametag on the center's 'reservation' list. One of Laura's young boys wanted to play in the computer center, but the chairs at the two computer screens were already occupied by other students. The child hovered over the seated children and insisted that he wanted to play on the computer. Laura came over to the computer center and told the boy, "You will have to wait your turn. You could do puzzles." The child responded "No!" He marched over to the dramatic play center but the teaching assistant, who was playing in the center with children, told him that center was already full. The child marched over to the block center, sat down, and began interacting with a boy who was already building with blocks. Laura moved

over to the block center, sat down, and told the child "You have to be kind". The boy

sat for a minute and seemed to calm down. He eyed an open chair at one of

computer screens and walked over to it. Laura got up and continued to move in-and-

out of the centers, engaging with the children as they played.

Playground Interactions

Laura also engaged continuously with her children on the playground. She

played with them on the swings, climbed with them on ladders, and sat with them at

the picnic table. On one of my visits I observed Laura interact with a child who did

not want to follow the rules of how to ride a trike around the trike trail. The young

boy had wanted to cut into line and take a trike before it was his turn. The teaching

assistant, who was monitoring the trike trail, told the boy to "Go sit down. Show me.

Ok, no bike." The boy stomped off and went over to the play scape. He grabbed the

pitcher of water that was sitting on a ledge and poured himself a cup of water. Laura

saw what had happened, calmly took the pitcher of water away from the child, and

began pouring cups of water for the other children. In the meantime, the angry boy

spilled water down his shirt. Laura told him to "Drink slowly. You are getting wet'.

She smiled at the boy, looked him in the eye, and then stroked his wet shirt in a

gentle manner. The young boy looked at Laura and gave her a bit of a smile.

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Laura's Conceptualizations

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In this section I describe Laura's conceptualizations of learning. The data in

this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from

the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Laura. It

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includes a description of Laura's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, the role

of the teacher, and the skills and knowledge children need for kindergarten.

Learning

As part of my first interview with Laura, I asked her if she would define

'learning' for me. Laura responded by saying, "Learning is exploring--trying new

things". Later, Laura expanded on her view of learning and added that "Children

learn through play and working with their classmates. [They learn] basic life skills".

In Laura's classroom, children were given extended periods of time to explore and

play in the classroom's centers. As children socialized with their peers, they learned

skills basic to life. Laura described to me how playing in centers benefited children.

She stated:

> I feel like these centers, and building a relationship, is helping them know
>
> how to talk to others, how to do a job, how to clean up after themselves—
>
> basic life skills you're going to use throughout your life.

Learning as an exploration not only helped children develop basic life skills, it also

allowed children the opportunity to make decisions and exercise their will. Laura

explained how playing in the centers facilitated choice-making:

> I feel that at centers they have choices. They just grab the food [in the
>
> camping center] and do their own thing, deciding what they want to do on
>
> their own.

For Laura, exploration through play created the space for children to make

independent decisions about what they wanted to do. Laura was surprised by her

children's ability to learn through exploration and she described a moment when

her children went beyond her expectations for learning in the campground center.

She described what happened:

> We have a camp. It's not all set up yet, but they try different things and they
>
> just start learning. I mean--I am surprised because I didn't show them. They
>
> were kind of doing it themselves.

Laura had not role-modeled to her children how to play in the campground center,

and yet she witnessed them spontaneously put food in a bowl and place it on the

campfire to 'cook'.

In the following section I will describe additional aspects within Laura's

conceptualization of learning. These aspects include how Laura conceptualized the

child as a learner, the role of the teacher, and what skills children needed before

going onto kindergarten.

The Child as a Learner

Laura conceptualized learning as an exploratory process. Within her

conceptualization, Laura viewed children as capable learners who could learn

through play, socializing with classmates, and exercising their choices. Classroom

spaces that facilitated exploration and the opportunity to make choices helped

children become independent thinkers. Laura was often surprised by her children's

capacity to learn through interacting with others. On one of my visits she told me

about an event she had earlier witnessed with children at the computer center.

During center time, a number of her students had gathered around the computers--

all wanting their turn. Laura told the hovering children, "You [children] just won't be waiting. Go play at [other] centers, and when they are done, you will have a turn". The children scattered to other centers. Laura described being amazed at their reaction. She told me that "They were able to play at the other centers knowing they will have a turn the next day". Laura's children were confident that they would have their turn at the computers. As young learners, her children demonstrated the ability to make a choice, delay their immediate desire, and go off to play at another center. Laura's children often surprised her with their innate capacity for learning and socializing.

The Role of the Teacher

As one of her responsibilities as a teacher, Laura wanted to be knowledgeable about the interests of her children. As children played in centers, she would intentionally engage with children so she could understand what interested them. She explained:

> I try to go around and see what each child is thinking—what they're doing.
>
> I have a small conversation just to see what's going on in their mind—to
>
> know what their interests are.

As part of her duties, Laura planned lessons and classroom activities in the afternoon while Betty taught the afternoon prekindergarten class. During this time, Laura could prepare lessons that were engaging to children because she knew their interests.

One activity that engaged children in the classroom throughout the day was their weekly helper job. By having a job, children learned responsibility, life skills, and had a moment when their participation and presence in the classroom was important. Laura expressed her commitment to providing children with weekly jobs:

> I love the job chart because I feel each child feels they have a responsibility—because it is teaching them how to do [things like] clean up, be a line leader, [or] carry out water.

For Laura, her role as a teacher was to help children become responsible contributors and engaging participants in her classroom. Children with weekly jobs had a vehicle for learning how to be an active member within a group.

There were, however, other aspects in her role as a teacher that were confusing to Laura. For instance, as she started her job as a Head Start teacher, Laura had anticipated that she would be able to spend time teaching children their letters and numbers, and reading books to her class. Laura described her confusion around her role as a teacher as she learned more about Head Start:

> When I got hired for this job, I thought they were going to learn their ABCs and numbers—but once I started going over the curriculum, I noticed it was more about skills. [Skills like] how to eat around the table, playing at centers, and having conversations with the children—not just reading or counting. It's more of me having a relationship with them.

In my first two interviews with Laura, she expressed her uneasiness with the lack of academic instruction time in her classroom. Laura's concern was heightened when she was instructed to take the *Circle Time Center* poster out of her circle time space and re-position it in a center. This directive from her Education Director concerned her for two reasons. One was that she had less time to teach children their letters and numbers. The second was that children had lost their opportunity to perform their weekly job in front of their peers. Laura told me "I feel like a person might not feel as important because not all the kids are around [to watch them do their jobs]". Laura worried that the calendar helpers, the weather helpers, and the counting gumball helpers would not experience the same sense of importance doing their job randomly at the new ABC center as they had during circle time in front of their peers. By my third interview with Laura, the uneasiness she felt between her conceptualization of learning and Head Start expectations had shifted. I will discuss her conceptual shift in a later section within this chapter.

Skills and Knowledge Children Need for Kindergarten

Laura conceptualized learning as an exploration that included play, socializing, and making choices. During my last interview with Laura, I asked her what skills she would like to see her children have as they entered kindergarten. Laura responded by saying, "They know how to work better around other kids". Even though Laura had expressed concern to me about the lack of academic instructional time in her classroom, she still wanted the children to have strong social-emotional skills as they left her and moved on to kindergarten.

<h1 style="text-align:center">How Laura Interfaced with her Workplace Ecologies</h1>

In this section I describe how Laura interfaced with the ecologies of her workplace environment. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Laura. This section describes Laura's confusion about being a Head Start teacher and how her conceptualizations of learning broadened. It concludes with a description of how Laura viewed safety and freedom in the classroom.

Laura's Confusion about Being a Head Start Teacher

In my first and second interview with Laura, she expressed confusion around her role as a Head Start teacher. One aspect that confused her was the lack of time she had to teach children their letters and numbers. Laura stated:

> I wish it could be like a preschool where I could teach them how to write their name or do the ABCs. They [Head Start trainers] told us not to do it [circle time] anymore—it should be the child's option.

Laura had been directed by her Education Director to move her *Circle Time Center* poster to a center. Relocating the poster took away many of Laura's direct-teaching activities and shortened her circle time with children.

Another aspect that confused Laura was the directive by the Education Director to stop reading the text in books to children. Instead, Laura was to 'leaf' through a book and ask the children questions about the pictures as a way of having the story unfold. Laura described what she was told to do:

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After the playground, I'll get a book out that relates to what we have been

learning and I'll just read to them. But they [trainers] told us not to read

because kids get bored. They said just show them the pictures and ask them

questions. I wish I could still read to them. I feel that at [public] preschool,

they might be actually reading to them.

Laura was confused about her role as a teacher. She thought her role was to help

children learn about letters, numbers, and books. Head Start had a more social-

emotional approach to learning in the classroom, and it seemed to include less and

less academic instructional time.

A Change in Laura's Conceptualization of Learning

In between my second and third interview with her, Laura participated in the

focus group. During my third interview with Laura, she surprised me as she

described how and why her perspective on learning had changed. Laura told me:

After the video, my view completely changed. They [children in the video]

were basically playing the whole time—but they were learning. They had

more free time, and [they were] not just sitting down having me to read to

them.

In the video, Laura watched children learn by playing all the time. The way in which

the children interacted with others, and learned from those interactions, seemed to

lift the cloud of confusion about the role of a teacher from Laura. Laura went on to

describe her new sense of her role as a teacher:

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So, I feel like my responsibility is now to teach them life skills--basic things

they wouldn't be learning at a [public] prekindergarten. Over there [at the

public prekindergarten] you're sitting down at your desk. Over here you get

to be hands-on, trying new things. In a [public] prekindergarten classroom

you don't have as much freedom.

Laura seemed to be accepting her Head Start's focus on social-emotional learning as

she stated that it was now her responsibility to teach children basic life skills. In this

statement, Laura said that in her classroom children get to 'try new things' (which is

how she earlier defined learning). Laura appeared to be finding new value in the

freedom play provides children—a freedom she thought was missing in a public-

school setting.

In this last interview with Laura, she also seemed to be reaching a new

accord with the *Circle Time Center* poster having been re-located to one of her

centers. She told me:

They [children] just go to it themselves without me, and just do it on their

own. It surprises me because I didn't think that was going to be the outcome.

It appeared that Laura's participation in the focus group was instrumental in

shifting her conceptualization of learning and her conceptualization of the learner.

Laura's experience seemed to re-trench her conceptualization of learning as an

exploratory process and lift away her doubts about the time she could spend on

academic instruction in her classroom. Her experience also seemed to deepen the

notion that children were capable learners because she witnessed her children

learning their numbers and letters in the new ABC center—something she had not expected to see.

Safety vs the Freedom to Explore

Keeping children safe at all times is a priority within the Head Start environment (Head Start Program Performance Standards #1302.47, p.40). Head Start child development centers must also comply with Texas state safety regulations (Minimal Standards for Child-Care Centers, 2015). After she viewed the children being so free in the German video, Laura commented that "It seems like there is not as much supervision as there will be in a normal kindergarten class in the United States". In Laura's Head Start environment, the freedom the German children had to explore in their classroom would not be tolerated because it would be deemed unsafe. Despite her safety concerns about the German kindergarten classroom, Laura was struck with the freedom the European children had to solve their own conflicts. Laura stated:

> When the kids were fighting, they fixed their own conflict themselves. Over here, I'm the intruder. I'm the one splitting them up. Maybe I should see what they're going to do to fix the problem?

It was Laura's practice to re-direct her children's behavior whenever their actions were incongruent to harmonious play. Seeing how the German kindergartners resolved conflict without adult intervention seemed to have Laura re-thinking her role in helping children resolve conflict in her own classroom.

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Laura, the Data, and the Research Questions

In this section I consider all the data I collected about Laura and answer the two research questions posited within this ethnographic case study. The two research questions were an exploration into how four prekindergarten teachers articulated their conceptualizations of learning, and how their conceptualizations interfaced with the ecologies of their workplace environment. In this section I describe Laura's conceptualizations of learning and how her conceptualizations interfaced with her perception and interpretation of the ecologies of her workplace environment.

Research Question #1: Laura's Conceptualizations

Laura conceptualized learning as a social exploratory experience where children learned from their peers and teachers. Laura saw children as capable learners who could socialize, form relationships, and exercise choices. Since learning was a social experience, Laura spent the day role-modeling to children *how* to interact with others and how to *learn* by interacting others. These three constructs—Laura's conceptualization of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher--were intertwined with one another, and they influenced the learning experiences Laura provided to children and the nature of the interactions in her classroom.

The children in Laura's classroom spent the majority of the day socializing and learning from others. Laura provided her children with long periods of time in centers and on the playground. Children were encouraged to explore and play in

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centers that were well stocked. Children had the freedom to flow to-and-from the

centers and Laura made sure they had the paints, play dough, and props they

needed to stay engaged in exploratory activities.

Laura was social with her children. She was sensitive to their needs. Laura

was calm when she expressed her expectations to a child. She smiled at children and

got down to their level to look them in the eye when communicating with them.

Laura did not raise her voice or threaten children when she found it necessary to re-

direct their behavior. She interacted with children in a manner that she wanted the

children to see and acquire for themselves.

Laura's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher

were intertwined and influenced the learning activities she provided to children and

the interactions she had with them in her classroom. Laura conceptualized learning

as a social, exploratory experience, children as capable learners, and her role as a

teacher as a facilitator of social play and interactions. Consequently, she provided

children with primarily child-centered activities where children could learn from

one another, develop strong social-emotional skills, and acquire a fundamental

knowledge of letters and numbers. Because learning was a social experience, Laura

was social with her children. She engaged with them as they arrived at school, while

they played, and when they all ate a meal together.

Research Question #2: Laura's Conceptualizations and her

Workplace Ecologies

Laura worked in a Head Start classroom as the morning prekindergarten teacher. Head Start teachers are expected to provide children with learning experiences that align with the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five.* Although this framework proposes a balanced course of study for young children, Laura experienced a disruption to this balanced approach when the agency's Education Director instructed Laura to curtail her instruction on letters and numbers and let the children learn their numbers and letters in a center.

When I first interviewed Laura, she expressed confusion over her role as a Head Start teacher. She told me that she wished her classroom could be more like preschool where she could teach her children their letters and numbers. However, her Education Director had instructed her to move her *Circle Time Center* poster to a center so that children would have a choice about learning their letters and numbers. This concerned Laura because she would no longer be able to teach the children their letters and numbers during circle-time--when they all sat on a carpet at her feet. Laura found herself in a position where she wanted to provide academic instruction to her children, but she was directed not to do so. Westman & Bergmark (2014) found that when teachers try to work in an atmosphere of competing conceptualizations they can begin to experience tension and stress.

Laura complied with her Education Director's directive, and moved the *Circle Time Center* poster to a new center known as the ABC center. Over time, two things

happened. In between my second and third interview with Laura, she participated in the focus group and watched a video of a German kindergarten class. Laura felt that the children in the video had great freedoms in their learning environment and appeared to be learning quite a lot. In my third interview with Laura, she described the impact the video had upon her. She was struck by the amount of freedom the German kindergartners had in their learning environments. Laura talked about how she appreciated the freedoms she had in her classroom setting, and compared her setting to the public prekindergarten classrooms that lacked the same kind of freedoms. The second event that seemed to impact Laura was how children were playing and learning in the new ABC center. She told me the new center was very popular with the children, and they played and practiced their letters and numbers on a regular basis there. Laura told me she was surprised to see the children so engaged with the new ABC center because she "didn't think that was going to be the outcome". Laura explained to me that she had shifted her thinking around learning in her classroom. She told me,

> So, I feel like my responsibility is to teach them life skills. Over here you get
> to be hands-on, trying new things. In a [public] prekindergarten classroom
> you don't have as much freedom.

The experiences Laura had with the video clip of the German kindergarten and the moving of the *Circle Time Center* poster resulted in Laura broadening her conceptualizations of learning and the learner. She now saw her children as having the capacity to learn their letters and numbers without her direct instruction. Schon

(1983) suggested that teachers who struggle with competing conceptualizations of the learning process may find themselves in a place where they need to broaden or redefine their thoughts about education (in Wen et al., 2011, p.963).

Laura's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher expanded when she interfaced with a workplace ecology that provided her with alternative ways of thinking about learning. Laura broadened her conceptualizations of learning to include a more expansive view of learning and the capacity of children to learn. When these two constructs shifted, so did her sense of her role as a teacher and the nature of the activities she provided to children in her classroom.

Betty's Daily Afternoon Routine

In this section I describe Betty's daily routines with her children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written field notes. This section includes a description of Betty's students and her afternoon routines. It describes nap time, snack time, circle time, and center time. It includes information about the children's transition home and the sparse amount of authentic print in the Head Start classroom.

Betty's Students

Betty's afternoon class consisted of 17 children--of which 16 children were primarily Spanish-speaking. Betty's children represented a number of ethnicities—Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic. The Cypress Cove afternoon prekindergarten class could not provide children with the same amount of time in

centers and on the playground as the morning class because the afternoon schedule called for children to take a 30-40-minute nap.

Circle Time

As Betty's afternoon class entered the portable, they hung up their backpacks, used the restrooms, washed their hands, and migrated over to the large carpet. Betty would then begin her afternoon circle time. In a fashion similar to Laura, she called for helpers to assist her with the activities centered around the blue vinyl *Circle Time Center* poster. After finishing the poster activities, the children sang the *Alphabet Song* and a number of other songs in English and Spanish.

During one of my visits and while children were still in circle time, Betty pointed to a tree (that had been constructed by Laura) and began reviewing parts of a tree with her children. Betty and her children talked about how trees could produce fruit in the summer and shed their leaves in the fall. She then led the children into a discussion about what trees needed to live and what fruit trees produced.

Figure 5.9 Laura and Betty's Tree

T—"So if I want to grow an apple, what do I need?"

C—"Seed."

C—"Sun."

C—"Water."

C—"Ground."

T—"What are names of fruits?"

C—"Bananas."

C—"Onions."

C—"Oranges."

C—"Pineapple."

C—"Apples, lemons."

C—"Strawberries."

C—"Cookies."

T—"Yes, we could say 'cookies' because the flour comes from wheat that grows

from the ground."

Betty's circle time lasted about ½ hour. Unlike the morning children who moved to

centers after circle time, the afternoon children went from circle time to nap time.

Afternoon Nap and Snack

Just before circle time ended, the teaching assistant would quietly place the

children's napping mats on the floor throughout the classroom. As Betty dismissed

the children from circle time, they would go over to their assigned mat and lie down.

The lights would be turned off, soft music would play, and the children quickly fell

fast asleep. Rest time lasted for 30-40 minutes. During rest time, Betty and the

teaching assistant wandered throughout the classroom checking on the sleeping

children.

At the end of nap time, the children picked up their mats, carried them to the

back of the classroom, and handed them to the teaching assistant. The teaching

assistant wiped down the maps and placed them onto a storage rack for airing and

drying. The children wandered off to the restrooms, washed their hands, and

gathered at the small tables for snack time. The afternoon snack was simple—a

pitcher of water and a bowl of pretzels—because the children had just eaten lunch

in the elementary school cafeteria. The teachers and children socialized and

conversed with one another as they ate their snack together.

Brush Teeth, Circle Time, and Center Time

After snack, the children cleaned up their tables, retrieved their toothbrush

from the teaching assistant, and returned to the small tables for the afternoon's

tooth brushing event. Children and adults sang and brushed their teeth together. At

this point in the afternoon, Betty would read a book to the children using the

leafing-through-the-pages method. This second circle time was short and lasted

about 10 minutes. After circle time, children were dismissed to go play in the

centers. Center time lasted for about ½ hour (instead of an hour) and Betty engaged

and conversed with her children as they moved in-and-out of the centers.

The Transition Home

After the short center time, children retrieved their backpacks and lined up at the front door. The cook took the bus riders to the elementary school. With the help of her door holder and line-leader, Betty and her teaching assistant walked the remaining children outside to the playground. The afternoon children had about 15 minutes to play on the playground before their parents began to arrive to take them home.

Authentic Print

In Laura's and Betty's Head Start classroom, I did not observe teacher-generated authentic print hanging on the walls with the exception of a birthday graph. (*Authentic print is a visual representation of a deeper conversation with children that reveals their problem-solving skills and higher-order thinking skills*.) Like Laura, Betty primarily asked children simple recall questions when teaching them letters of the alphabet, shapes, or the life cycle of a tree.

Figure 5.10 Authentic Print: Children's Birthdays
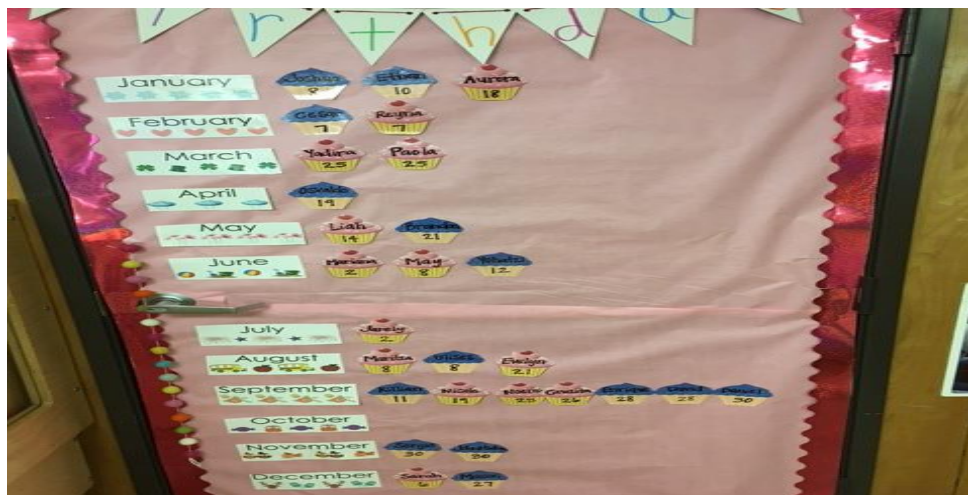
Betty's afternoon children were not able to experience the extended times in centers or on the playground as did Laura's morning children. Despite their truncated time in centers and on the playground, the children followed procedures in much the same manner as did the morning children—helpers greeted classmates in circle time, assisted Betty with the *Circle Time Center* poster, and performed their duties as line-leader and door-holder. Betty's classroom activities focused on the development of social-emotional skills and less on the acquisition of knowledge and academic problem-solving skills.

Interactions with Children

In this section I describe Betty's interactions with children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written field notes.

Betty Was Social with Her Children

Betty was social with her children. She continuously interacted with children throughout her afternoon class, and many of her interactions included social conversations with them. On one of my visits I observed Betty talking to a child as her classmates gathered on the carpet for circle time.

C—"I have horses. A black one, a brown one, and a white one."

T—"When do you ride them?"

C—"On the weekends."

C—"I have dogs."

T—"Now we're going to sing a song and then we will rest."

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C—"I'm tired."

T—"You are tired? You look tired."

Betty conversed with her children when they ate snack together. On one particular day, the conversation turned to what the children had to eat for lunch in the school cafeteria.

T—"Enchiladas, umm, umm. Did you finish your enchiladas?"

C—"Both chicken and cheese."

T—"What did you have to drink?"

C—"Chocolate milk."

T—"Can you have water in the fountain in the hallway (in the school)?"

Betty was social with her children and she was sensitive to their needs. One afternoon and upon waking up from nap, Betty discovered that a little girl had soiled herself. Betty wrapped her in a blanket (so other children would not notice) and said quietly to her, "It's OK, it's OK." She carefully walked the child to the back of the room and had her stand in the girl's line for the restroom. Keeping a close eye on her, Betty put on gloves and thoroughly wiped down the child's mat. When it was the little girl's turn for the restroom, Betty handed her a change of clothes and she went into the restroom to change. The little girl came out of the restroom and continued on with washing her hands and going to the snack table. I was amazed with how private the incident was for the child.

Betty's Conceptualizations of Learning

In this section I describe Betty's conceptualizations of learning. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Betty. It describes

her conceptualization of learning, how she conceptualized the child as a learner and her role as a teacher. It concludes with the skills and knowledge Betty wants her children to have as they go off to kindergarten.

Learning

In my first interview with Betty, I asked her to define learning for me. Without hesitation, she said:

> Learning is through exploration. Always let children explore. There's nothing called messy. Yesterday we introduced the computer, but they were able to get it.

Betty's children were able to 'get' the computer because they were allowed to explore it. For Betty, learning was not restricted to learning about an object. Learning could occur when relationships or connections were being made with others. Betty described the connection she saw children building with their bus driver, "They make the connection that this is my bus driver who takes me home and this is the bus that brings me to school. It's learning for them". Betty saw learning occurring all the time. She explained:

> [They learn] through the things you do every day--because everything is a learning moment. We're learning from them, and they're learning from us. So, everybody is learning together.

Betty viewed learning as transactional where children learned from adults and adults were learned from children. For Betty, everything was a learning moment.

Betty defined learning as an exploration. Within her conceptualization of learning there existed other aspects of learning. One was the notion that learning brought about the formation of relationships and connections with others. Another aspect was that learning was transactional—people learned from one another. And lastly, every moment was a learning moment.

The Child as a Learner

Betty viewed learning as transactional where children learned from adults and adults learned from children. Children could also learn from one another. Betty explained:

> If a child doesn't know how to do play dough, they're watching that other child and what [that child] does with play dough. They're learning as they go along.

In Betty's classroom, learning as an exploration meant that children were given the opportunity to watch their classmates as they explored and played. As children played together, they learned from one another. Not only did children learn from one another, they liked helping their classmates. Betty told me that her children "love to be able to help other people".

Betty saw her children as unique individuals. She told me, "Every child to me is unique and everything they learn is unique". Because her children were unique, their learning trajectory was their own. Betty explained that "Kids learn at a different pace". Kids not only learned at their own pace, they also had different skill

sets depending upon their age. Betty explained why a child's age made a difference in learning:

> What at three years old and [what] is almost four [years old] --is learning will not be the same thing as someone already four going to five--because the learning skills are so different and their brain works differently.

Betty understood that a child's brain "works differently" at four years of age than it would at five years of age. For Betty, her children were capable learners who could learn from one another. She viewed a child's learning trajectory as being unique and following its own pace. Betty saw a child's learning potential framed by his age, and observed that children liked helping their classmates learn.

The Role of the Teacher

In her role as a teacher, Betty saw one of her responsibilities as helping children feel safe away when they were away from home and at school. She wanted children to build bonds with their classmates so they felt safe in their new school environments. Betty explained:

> They have that bond—the same classroom, same cafeteria and [they] play together outside. So, they have a sense of security. It's OK to have friends. It's OK to be away from home--and mom is going to be home when you [get off] the bus.

Because school was a new environment for her children, Betty role-modeled to her children how school worked. She told her students what was expected from them

and how to act in their new environment. Betty explained to me how she helped

children acclimate to a new environment outside their home:

> [School] is new actually. I model it to them—how to do it. You make sure you
>
> clean and you put the toys back into the container. I'm always sitting down at
>
> centers and interacting with them.

Betty conceptualized learning as transactional. Since learning occurred as an

interaction between and among individuals, Betty sat with children and interacted

with them during center time and throughout the day.

Betty wanted her children to bond to others, and to school. As a way of

motivating children to participate in classroom activities, Betty assigned a weekly

job to each one of her students. Betty explained why classroom jobs were important.

She said, "The one thing is—you give them a job. They feel involved because you're

letting them be a part of something. It motivates them". For Betty, children who felt

important were motivated to interact, explore, and learn.

Betty described another method she used to help children feel important and

involved in the classroom. When Betty taught the children letters, she connected

specific letters to their name. Sometimes she would connect certain letters to her

own name. She explained to me why connecting letters to a name was important.

She said, "Oh, that's my letter. That's my name—it starts with 'B'. That's what

motivates them". Betty thought that children would be more motivated to learn

their letters when they understood how they related to the spelling of their own

name and/or her name.

Skills and Knowledge for Future Success

In our last interview, I asked Betty to describe to me what skills she wanted her children to have as they left her and moved on to kindergarten. Betty told me, "At least one thing I want them to receive is learning to play together". For Betty, children who knew how to play together knew how to learn from one another.

How Betty Interfaced with Her Workplace Ecologies

In this section I describe how Betty interfaced with the ecologies of her workplace environment. The data collected in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Betty. This section includes Betty's perspective on the differences between Head Start classrooms and public prekindergarten classrooms, parental relationships, and safety in the classroom.

Differences between Head Start and the Public-School Prekindergarten

Betty's Head Start was in a partnership with Cypress Cove Elementary School. As a result of this partnership, Betty's children spent ½ the day with a public-school teacher and ½ the day in her Head Start classroom. Betty saw distinct differences between her classroom and the public-school classroom. She described some of these differences:

> In [public] prekindergarten there is more of 'this is what you do'. In Head Start, [children] have more choices. In public prekindergarten [the children are told] 'You do this, you do this'. They don't have that freedom, that choice to play.

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Betty saw the public-school environment as providing children with more teacher-directed activities and her classroom as providing children with more child-directed activities: make choices and play.

Parental Relationships

Another difference between the public-school setting and the Head Start setting was how parents were treated. Betty viewed the public school as being disconnected to families. Betty explained:

> That's the difference between the ISD and Head Start. If a child is not in school after 2 days, they don't contact the parent. We are about nurturing—having a sense of where the child is. We do that [contact parents] because it's part of who we are. It brings to [the parents] knowledge that I can always count on these people.

Betty saw her role as a teacher (and center director) as one who stayed in contact with, and connected to, her children's families. Betty wanted her parents to know they could count on her. For Betty, her approach was distinctly different from the approach the public school had with families.

Safety in the Classroom

Another defining characteristic of a Head Start environment was its focus on safety in the classroom. The issue of safety came up during the focus group and Betty responded to the freedoms children had in the German classroom by saying:

It's not safe—the way they let them go to dance class or gymnastics or go to a

room where a teacher can't see them--because there is a blind spot. So, they

move around from room to room, doing whatever they want to do.

Betty conceptualized learning as an exploration, however, the latitude the German

children had to explore caused her concern for their safety.

Betty expressed another concern she had for the German children's safety.

She pointed out that at the end of the day, adults were taking children out of the

classroom and the teacher was nowhere to be seen. Betty said, "I didn't see parents

signing in and signing out [their children] so you know who's supposed to be

bringing you". Not only was this a concern for Betty, it clashed with her notion that

the teacher's role was to build relationships with the parent, and that included

connecting with the parent as the child arrived in the morning and was dismissed in

the afternoon. Betty stated, "There's nobody to greet them in the morning—like

they're not connected to the parents. You want to build a bond". For Betty, forming

relationships with parents and keeping children safe were her responsibility as a

teacher and center director.

Although the excessive freedoms and perceived lack of safety in the German

classroom were concerns for Betty, she was able to express that her concerns might

not be of concern to the German teachers. Betty told me, "You know, people have

different culture, so what we might think is not safe, to them--is okay". Betty was

able to see that from a different cultural view, the learning she witnessed in the

German kindergarten was within German cultural bounds.

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Betty, the Data, and the Research Questions

In this section I consider all the data I collected about Betty and answer the two research questions posited within this ethnographic case study. The two research questions were an exploration into how four prekindergarten teachers articulated their conceptualizations of learning, and how their conceptualizations interfaced with the ecologies of their workplace environment. In this section I describe Betty's conceptualizations of learning and how her conceptualizations interfaced with her perception and interpretation of the ecologies of her workplace environment.

Research Question #1: Betty's Conceptualizations

Betty defined learning as a social exploration and every minute was a potential learning moment. She viewed children as capable learners who could form relations with others, understand what it was to be part of a community, and develop social skills through play. As a teacher, Betty role-modeled how a classroom worked by engaging with children throughout the day and demonstrating to them how to explore and learn from others. These three constructs—her conceptualization of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher—were strongly linked to one another, and they influenced the learning experiences Betty provided to children and the nature of the interactions in her classroom.

Betty provided learning experiences in her classroom that facilitated exploration and play. Children played in a number of well-stocked centers and moved freely to-and-from the centers at will. Children could freely run through the

play scape and the playground's large field when they were outside. When children were on the playground, Betty provided trikes and balls to the children and engaged them to run in relay races.

Betty was social with her children. She greeted them when they arrived at school, played with them while they were at centers, and comforted them when they couldn't fall asleep at nap time. Betty showed her children how to socialize with their friends and how to explore and learn from friends. Betty smiled at her children and did not become impatient with them. She listened to the children's stories and followed their interests during conversation and when they were playing inside or outside.

Betty's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher were intertwined and influenced the learning activities she provided to children and the interactions she had with them in her classroom. Betty conceptualized learning as a social experience and her children as capable of learning through socializing activities. She saw her role as a teacher of being a facilitator of social experiences. Consequently, she provided children with child-directed activities where they could play and explore. Because learning was a social experience, Betty interacted with her children in a sensitive manner so they could learn how to be sensitive to others.

Research Question #2: Betty's Conceptualizations and her

Workplace Ecologies

Betty was the afternoon Cypress Cove afternoon prekindergarten teacher. She shared the same Head Start classroom and workplace ecologies with Laura, the

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morning prekindergarten teacher. During my observations and interviews with Betty, she never mentioned any concerns to me about her workplace environment. She was not troubled by the philosophical approach of Head Start or the directives coming to her from her agency's Education Director. Betty's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher were closely associated with the expectations of her workplace. Schon (1983) identified 'value-conflict' as an element around which teachers might have to reconcile their educational values and beliefs with real-life conditions in the workplace (in Wen et al., 2011). Betty did not appear to be struggling with any value conflicts within her workplace. For Betty, her learning constructs appeared closely aligned with the ecologies of her workplace environment.

Cypress Cove Head Start Focus Group

In this section I describe some of the interchanges that occurred between the five individuals that participated in the Cypress Cove Head Start Focus Group. The interchanges came from the transcription of the video-taped recording of the focus group. The individuals who participated in the focus group were Betty and Laura, teachers; Lucy, the cook; Nelly the teaching assistant; and Esperanza the family advocate. All names were pseudonyms. All three focus group activities will be discussed in chapter 7.

Despite their concerns about safety, the lack of academic visual prompts, and a perception that teachers where not building bonds with parents, participants in

the focus group did find elements within the classroom they viewed favorably. Nelly

saw the environment as promoting student independence. She commented,

"I think the teacher is making the children independent. They don't depend on

anybody but themselves". Esperanza agreed with Nelly's observation and saw the

independence in the classroom as helping children acquire life skills. She stated,

"It's more like a life skill. You teach yourself how to learn. I'm going to give you this

environment—you go out there and learn". Esperanza proposed that there was a

link between children experiencing independence and preparing for future

academics. She suggested that:

> They are developing throughout those activities. They are developing and
>
> preparing for reading, writing, and math. They're maturing their minds.

Not only did Esperanza think that the children were preparing their minds for

reading, writing, and math, but they were also learning how to solve conflict without

help from an adult. Esperanza explained how the children's independence was

linked to social problem-solving:

> They were learning through their own experiences and learning how to
>
> handle situations. They handled it own their own--without the teacher
>
> having to say [something]. I thought that was good independence.

Laura appeared to reflect on Esperanza's observation and offered her thoughts on

the link of independence to social problem-solving. Laura said:

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When the kids were fighting, they fixed their own conflict themselves. Over

here, I'm the intruder. I'm the one splitting them up. Maybe I should see what

they're going to do to fix the problem?

The way in which the German kindergarten children 'fixed their own conflict'

seemed to have Laura reconsidering how she facilitates children solving their social

problems in her classroom. She stated that she might consider seeing "what they're

going to do to fix the problem". Laura seemed to be entertaining the idea that her

children had the capacity to solve their social conflicts without her intervention.

Although children being independent (playing with sticks, children playing

where adults cannot see them, children arriving and departing without contact with

the teacher) came with concerns around safety protocols, Betty offered an

observation about culture. She said, "You know, people have different culture, so

what we might think is not safe, to them--is okay". Betty could see that different

cultural norms allow for classroom activity in Germany that might not be acceptable

in her American classroom.

Chapter 6: Results

Setting #3: Everest Peak Academy, a Public Charter School

Everest Peak Academy Setting

In this section I describe the setting at Everest Peak Academy in which

Bridgette's classroom was situated. The data in this section was collected through

the method of participant observation and came from my hand-written and

transcribed field notes. This section includes information about Everest Peak's

unfavorable TEA rating, the school's adopted International Baccalaureate (IB)

program, and a description of the IB planner. It concludes with a description of

Bridgette's prekindergarten classroom and her students.

Unfavorable TEA Rating

As a Texas charter public school, Everest Peak Academy was required to

meet the same academic performance standards as any other Texas public school. A

successful charter school would be rated 'met alternative standard' under the Texas

Education Agency (TEA) school accountability rating system (TEA, 2016). When I

conducted my research in the spring of 2017, Everest Peak Academy had been rated

'Improvement Required"' by TEA because the school had met only 56% of its

academic indicators. Everest Peak was working on an improvement plan to meet

those indicators. During my time at Everest Peak Academy, the prekindergarten

teacher who participated in my study referenced the school's TEA rating, and

expressed concerns about the challenges the school faced reconciling the

International Baccalaureate (IB) approach to learning with the state's accountability rating system. Her viewpoint will be described later in this chapter.

Everest Peak's Academy's International Baccalaureate (IB) Program

As part of district-wide adoption of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program of study, the teachers at Everest Peak Academy practiced the tenants of an IB program. Overall, an IB program of study strived to develop:

Internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013).

To help children become global citizens, the IB program had developed a *Learner Profile* of ten attributes that were intended to guide children as they grew and developed. The ten attributes that children were to internalize were:

1. Inquirers
2. Knowledgeable
3. Thinkers
4. Communicators
5. Principled
6. Open-Minded
7. Caring
8. Risk-Takers
9. Balanced
10. Reflective.

As part of the larger (middle school and high school) IB program of study, an elementary IB program was created for elementary schools and was known as The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (PYP). It advocated five essential elements in the teaching of younger students:

1. The acquisition of traditional academic *knowledge.*

2. The acquisition of *concepts* through exploration and structured inquiry.

3. The acquisition of *skills* or broad capabilities.

4. The acquisition of positive *attitudes* (IB *Learner Profile*).

5. The ability to create responsible and thoughtful *action*.

As an IB school, teachers at Everest Peak Academy were expected to collaborate in the planning process, and collaborating with one's colleagues included defining the curriculum's central ideas and discussing how to best bring inquiry into those ideas and into the classroom.

IB Courses of Inquiry or Planners

In the IB Primary Years Programme, teachers were required to write six planners, or courses of inquiry, that were to be implemented in their classrooms throughout the school year. At Everest Peak Academy, a prekindergarten teacher had to write only four planners, however, planners for three year olds needed to be significantly different from the planners for four year olds. Any IB planner, whether for pre-kindergartners or high schoolers, had to address the following concepts:

1. Who are we?

2. Where we are in place and time.

3. How we express ourselves.

4. How the world works.

5. How we organize ourselves.

6. Sharing the planet.

Teachers at Eden Park had an instruction coach who would stop by twice a month to help them with their planning and implementation of IB curriculum.

The Everest Peak Prekindergarten Classroom

Everest Peak Academy had only one prekindergarten classroom. It was located in a one-story building that was draped with mature southern oak trees. The front of the school was actually located on the backside of the building, and one had to park in the back-parking lot to walk up to the school's main entrance. To get to the front door, one walked through a courtyard that contained a picnic table and a rough natural amphitheater. The prekindergarten classroom was located to the right of the front desk, and one had to travel down a long hallway past the principal's and vice-principal's office to reach it. The prekindergarten classroom had a second entrance/doorway that parents used when dropping off their children.

Bridgette's prekindergarten classroom was large and spacious—it had ample room for a circle time space, multiple early childhood centers, and an 'office' space for the teacher. It was ringed with windows and had views out to the courtyard and to the street.

The children's restroom was located in the hallway that housed the principal's and vice-principal's office. The prekindergarten students had to walk

silently in line as they went to use the restroom so that they would not disturb any of the administrators.

Figure 6.1 Library Center   Figure 6.2 Bridgette's 'Office' Space

Bridgette's Students

Bridgette taught a class of three-year olds in the morning and a class of four-year olds in the afternoon. Both her classes had the capacity to serve a maximum of twenty children. During the time I spent with Bridgette, she had 15 children enrolled (5 boys and 10 girls) in her morning class and 17 children enrolled (11 boys and 6 girls) in her afternoon class. Both her classes represented a mix of ethnicities--White, Hispanic, and African-American, but the more predominate ethnicity was White. All her students were English-speaking children.

Bridgette's Daily Classroom Routines

In this section I describe Bridgette's daily classroom routines with her
children. The data in this section was collected through the method of participant
observation and came from my hand-written and transcribed field notes. This
section includes descriptions of the children's breakfast and arrival time; the day's
circle times and center times; and lunch time. It concludes with a description of
journal writing time and the prevalence of the IB curriculum in Bridgette's
classroom.

Breakfast and Morning Arrival

In the morning and if accompanied by a parent, breakfast was provided to
Bridgette's three-year olds in the cafeteria. Many of Bridgette's students did not
partake of breakfast in the cafeteria, and the children who ate at home would begin
arriving around 7:45am. Bridgette would greet her parents, children would say their
goodbyes and go off to put-up their backpacks in a cubby located in the hallway.
Bridgette's teaching assistant watched over the children as they stored their
backpacks and used the hallway restroom. Many of the children brought a personal
water bottle to class, and they placed their bottles on a low-standing bookcase by
the side door.

Once children completed all of the arrival procedures, they quickly sat down
at one of five work tables. Each table had an array of morning activities for the
children to choose from and included items such as playdough, glass letters, puzzles,

and Legos. The children worked on these arrival activities until circle time began at 8:30am.

Circle Time

To signal the close of the morning's arrival activities, Bridgette would sing a song that she made up. Her song directed the children to put away their materials and join her on the large carpet. Once the children were seated on the carpet at her feet, Bridgette reminded them how to act during circle time. She told the children to sit crisscross applesauce--with their hands folded like birds in a nest.

Once everyone was settled, Bridgette and her children would sing a welcoming song in English, and then in Spanish. After singing, Bridgette would lead the children as they counted out loud how many friends were there today and how many friends were not. Next, it was time for the alphabet. Children stood up, and Bridgette displayed a set of alphabet cards. As Bridgette held a letter card, everyone called out the letter, touched their head, made the sound of the letter, touched their shoulders, said a word that began with the letter, and (lastly) touched their feet. The pace Bridgette kept through this activity allowed all the children to participate.

The calendar was next. Bridgette asked the children what day it was, and the day's date. After calendar, it was time to spell out two helper children's names. Bridgette picked two cards with the names of two children. Together, everyone sang the letters in each name, and sounded out the syllables in both names. When the name song ended, the children sat down and Bridgette picked up a hand-held white board. She wrote "Today is Thursday and it is ......?" The children made predictions

about the outside temperature, and after some wild guesses, Bridgette told them that it was 66 degrees outside. She explained to the children that 66 degrees meant they might want to take a jacket with them as they went outside to the playground.

The next circle time activity was a read aloud. On one of my visits, Bridgette asked the children to talk about a topic they had recently been discussing.

T—"We have been talking a lot about ……………?"

C—"Listening".

C—"Friends".

T—"We did talk last week about listening. This week we have been talking about what it is to be a good friend. When you try a new activity, or play with a new friend we are ……………?"

C—"Open-minded."

T—"When we play with lots of friends we are ……………?"

C—"Balanced".

Figure 6.3 IB *Learner Profile* Attribute
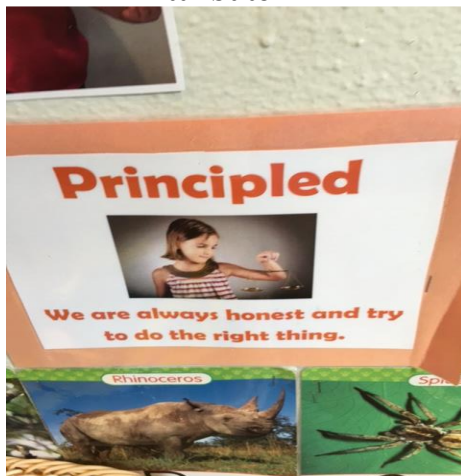
Figure 6.4 IB *Learner Profile* Attribute

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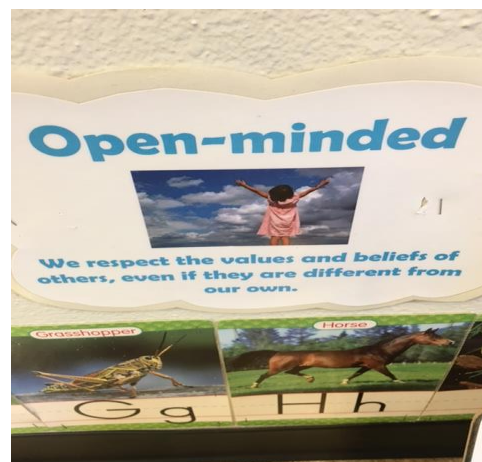
T—"I'm going to read a story and I want you to decide if the friends in the

story are principled, open-minded, or good communicators.

Bridgette reads the book *Llama, Llama: A Time to Share* to her children. After she

finished the book, Bridgette asked her children another question.

T—"Does it ever make you sad or mad when someone plays with your toys?

If you are really good with sharing, show me 2 thumbs-up!

Figure 6.5 IB *Learner Profile* Attribute

At the conclusion of the discussion on being a friend and some of the IB

Learner Profile attributes, the day's two helpers went first to get their jackets from

the cubbies. As the children lined up to go outside, Bridgette and her teaching

assistant helped them put on their jackets. At 9:00am the children exited the

classroom and made the long walk to the playground. Bridgette's children ran freely

on the playground that contained rope swings and a play scape. Two other classes

were on the playground with Bridgette's class. All the attending adults supervised

the children, but they did not play with the children or engage them very often in conversation.

Center Time

As the children came back into the classroom from the playground, they put away their jackets in the hallway cubbies, and some children lined-up to use the restroom. All the other children went directly to a center of their choosing. I noticed that the children did not use a nametag to claim a spot at a center. Instead, they moved freely in-and-out of centers at will.

On one of my visits, Bridgette reminded the children that they had been studying winter and today they would have the chance to play with 'snow'. The sensory table had been filled with flour and oil. The children interacted with the snow table like any other center, and moved in-and-out of it as they chose. The snow table was never over-run by children, and they were allowed to spend as much time as they wanted in the 'snow'.

Figure 6.6 Studying Winter   Figure 6.7 The Snow Table

The morning children spent 50 minutes in centers. In addition to the snow table, another table top had ice, salt and water on it. Children mixed and made salt water. They also experimented with putting salt directly on ice to see if it sped up the melting process. Children had access to an art table that was complete with paper, glue, markers, and paints. They played with Legos on another table top, and flowed back-and-forth between the library center and dramatic play center which were in close proximity to one another. The block center, which was situated alongside the circle time carpet, was popular with both boys and girls. Bridgette and her teaching assistant flowed with the children as they moved among the centers and interacted with them throughout center time.

Figure 6.8 Whiteboard Storytelling Center

Figure 6.9 Dramatic Play Center

On one of my visits, the children engaged in an activity related to the book, *The Foot Book* by Dr. Seuss. Bridgette and her teaching assistant had placed a long

piece of green butcher paper on the floor. At the beginning of the paper, chairs were lined-up so children could sit and wait their turn. Bridgette painted the bottom of their feet with the color of their choice. At the end of the paper, the teaching assistant had a plastic container filled with soapy water and lots of paper towels. After getting their feet painted, the children walked the length of the green butcher paper and made a foot trail. After admiring their work, the children stepped into the soapy water, dried their feet with the paper towels, and went off to another center.

Figure 6.10 Children Create a Foot Trail

At 10:30am it was time to clean up center time. Bridgette led the group in a clean-up song. Children cleaned-up (and played a little too). Bridgette moved over to the large carpet and sang a song to draw the children to her for a second circle time.

A Short Circle Time and Lunch

When the children were settled once again on the large carpet, Bridgette read the book, *Geraldine's Big Snow* to them. At the story's end, children were dismissed to their cubbies to retrieve their jackets, backpacks, and lunch pails from home. The children lined up by the side door, went outside to the courtyard, and made the long trek to the school's entrance (because it was less stressful than going the short distance down the hallway). Bridgette and the teaching assistant opened the front door and walked the children to the school cafeteria.

In the cafeteria, Bridgette and her teaching assistant supervised their children as they ate lunch, and they helped them open individually wrapped food items that were placed on their cardboard trays. On one day, lunch consisted of hotdogs, carrots, and milk. On another visit, children had a small boxed pizza, a small bowl of salad, an apple, and a carton of chocolate milk. After lunch, Bridgette and her teaching assistant walked the children to the courtyard where they sat and waited for parents to pick up their child.

Afternoon Arrival and Circle Time

Bridgette's afternoon class was a class of four-year old's. Her afternoon children had lunch at home and so they came directly to her classroom. Bridgette greeted her afternoon children and parents as they entered the classroom. The children went off to the cubbies to put up their backpacks and then quickly gathered on the carpet for circle time (there were no arrival table activities in the afternoon).

Bridgette's afternoon circle time routines were similar to her morning circle time routines. However, because her afternoon children were older, Bridgette did make some changes in how she conducted her afternoon circle time. Circle time began with a welcoming song-- sung first in English and then in Spanish. I witnessed one of her adjustments when it was time to count present and absent children. Instead of all of the children counting out loud as a group, Bridgette called on one child to count his classmate's heads. After the child finished counting, and instead of going to centers, the afternoon children moved into journal writing.

Journal Writing

Before the children picked up their journals from the basket at Bridgette's feet, she reminded her students about journal time etiquette and behavior. The children were instructed to not look at a friend's journal, nor make any comment about what was in a classmate's journal. Bridgette explained to the children

Figure 6.11 The Letter Wall with Removable Magnetic Names

that the day's journal entry could be a description of how they made their ice sculptures at home before bringing them to school. She reminded the children that they should write their name at the top of their journal page. After Bridgette's expectations were understood, the children moved to a table. Some of the children removed their name from the letter wall so they could copy from it as they wrote in their journals.

The children wrote in their journals for 25 minutes. Bridgette and her teaching assistant moved from table-to-table and helped children write the letters in their name, and with more proficient students, how to spell and write unfamiliar words. At the end of journal time, children placed their journals back into the basket on the large carpet, and joined Bridgette for another circle time.

A Short Circle Time

With all her children seated on the carpet, children stood up and began to sing the alphabet song. During the singing, Bridgette held the alphabet cards and flashed them one-by-one to the children. The children called out the letter, said the sound of the letter, and called out a word that began with the letter. However, unlike their morning counterparts, the children did not touch their head, shoulders, or feet while singing. The pace of the song moved a bit faster than it did in the morning, and some of the children looked away from Bridgette and focused on the magnetic letter wall (artifact 3.11) as another way of seeing the letters of the alphabet. Bridgette did not seem to mind their shift in gaze, and the singing commenced without interruption.

Upon finishing with the alphabet song, the children sat down and Bridgette picked-up her small, hand-held white board. She told the children she wanted to spell out the word 'today'. Unlike this activity in the morning where Bridgette said the words and wrote them directly onto the white board, Bridgette prompted her children to spell out the word 'today' with her. The children helped construct the sentences, "Today is Thursday. It is 77degrees" and together as a group, read them out loud. After writing the message of the day, Bridgette put the white board down and reminded the children that they had been studying winter. Bridgette began a discussion with her children about how animals lived in the cold weather.

T—"Close your eyes and imagine it is really cold outside. What do we do to stay warm when it is cold outside?"

C—"Wear a jacket."

T—"What about animals? Could a rabbit get a blanket?"

T—"So we need to think about how the weather affects animals in the wild."

Bridgette read the book, *Winter Rabbit* to the children. After finishing the book, she continued the discussion about animals in the winter with the children.

T—"Can we make a snow rabbit and it will come to life? I don't think so. This is pretend. I saw two bears in the story. Why is ice so important to polar bears? We are going to read a book about why polar bears need ice to live."

All of sudden the librarian appeared at the door. It was time for the children to go to the library for a story. The discussion about animals in the winter would have to continue at another time.

Center Time

After their second circle time with their teacher, the children were dismissed to centers. Bridgette did not release the children to centers by calling them by name or playing a transition game with them. The children just get up and moved to a center of their choice. The children were able to regulate their flow in-and-out of centers and I never witnessed a tussle between students about whose turn it was to play in a particular center.

The four-year old children played in the centers much like the three-year old children. However, some activities were provided to the three-year olds that were not provided to the four-year olds and vice versa. For instance, the four-year old children did not paint their feet or play with snow dough. The three-year old children did not have journal time nor did they 'read' books aloud to their classmates during circle time.

The afternoon children played in centers for approximately 45-50 minutes. After they cleaned up the centers, the children gathered on the large carpet to get ready to go to the playground. Bridgette sent the children by twos-and-threes to get their backpacks and jackets out of their cubbies. When the children were ready and lined up, Bridgette and her teaching assistant walked the children to the playground. They supervised the children, but did not play with them. From the playground, the children walked with their teachers to the gym where they waited for a parent to pick them up. It was the end of Bridgette's teaching day.

IB Curriculum in Bridgette's Classroom.

The International Baccalaureate curriculum was evident in Bridgette's classroom. The program's *Learner Profile* attributes were posted in her circle time space (Artifacts 3.3-3.5) and Bridgette referred to them when children were in circle time learning about the attributes and when conflict arose between friends and they needed help problem-solving a disagreement.

Bridgette had decided to develop a planner, or course of inquiry, around the IB concept of 'How the World Works' and she had integrated that concept into a study of the changes seasons brings to the natural world. Bridgette had created teacher-generated visuals that helped support her course of study and they were posted in circle time space.

Figure 6.12 IB Planner: How the World Works   Figure 6.13 IB Planner: How the World Works

Bridgette had also integrated the IB mission of "Developing internationally minded people who recognize their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet and help to create a better and more peaceful world" (IB Organization,

2014) into her children's essential agreements or class rules. The essential elements

described how children were to interact with others (Artifact 3.13). The IB notion of

a global society was represented in Bridgette's classroom with multiple posters

posted throughout the room that portrayed people from different cultures from

around the world (Artifact 3.14).

Figure 6.14 Essential Agreements   Figure 6.15 A Global Society

Bridgette's Interactions with Children

In this section I describe Bridgette's interactions with children. The data in

this section was collected through the method of participant observation and came

from my hand-written and transcribed field notes.

Bridgette Creates Context

When Bridgette interacted with children, she tried to guide their thinking

about forming relationships with others and being fair to friends. Bridgette would

create context around a situation so children could understand how to think

through an interaction or conflict with a friend. For instance, one morning as

children were getting ready to go to the cafeteria for lunch, a child complained that

he was hungry, and he wanted to get his sack lunch and start eating right away.

Bridgette responded:

> T—"How would it make you feel if we ate food and some of our friends did not?"
>
> C—"Sad."
>
> T—"Yes. That's why we need to wait for them to bring the food."
>
> T—"I'm going to call our special helpers to line up first. Get your things and line

up. Remember our resolution to get our things quietly and calmly."

The context Bridgette created around a situation often had children thinking about how they would feel, or others would feel, if they found themselves in a similar situation. One day I observed Bridgette speaking to her children about snatching toys from a friend:

> T—"What could happen if we snatch something away from a friend? We could
>
> make a bigger problem. Sometimes when we snatch a toy from a friend, that
>
> friend can get mad or sad. So, we need to use our words."

In this interaction, Bridgette was asking children to think about how a friend would feel if someone snatched a toy away. By thinking about the feelings of others, children would become more aware of the consequences of their actions and learn how to "...help and create a more peaceful world" (IB Mission, 2013).

Bridgette often used the stories she read to children to help them further develop their thinking around forming friendships and interacting peacefully with others. On one of my visits, Bridgette had just finished reading the book, *Llama, Llama: A Time to Share* to her three-year old children. She asked them about their

earlier predictions about the story, what the problem was in the story, and how to be a good friend.

T—"Did you make the right prediction? Llama, Llama got his arm ripped off. This has made it really worse."

T—"What do you think his mommy will tell him to do?"

C—"Fix the problem."

T—"What was the problem?"

C—"Sharing!"

T—"Sometimes when someone doesn't share, sometimes it's best to just walk away and play somewhere else."

T—"Are they working together?"

C—"Yes."

T—"So they are cooperating."

T—"Remember, a good friend is caring, sharing, and a good communicator."

In this interaction, Bridgette uses the story of the Llama and the IB *Learner Profile* attributes to help children think about sharing and being a good friend. Bridgette often took the opportunity to relate a circumstance to the IB *Learner Profile* attributes to help children think through a new or upcoming situation. For instance, after informing children that they would not celebrate Valentine's Day with a party, but they would be able to exchange Valentine's cards, Bridgette started a discussion about what it meant to be a friend.

T—"Let's look at our Learner Profiles and talk about which one helps you be a better friend."

C—"Risk-taker."

T—"How does that make you a better friend?"

C—"Brave."

T—"You want to make a new friend, you might have to be brave and take a risk."

C—"Be caring."

T—"How can you show your friend you are caring? What if you were taking a puzzle over to the table and dropped it? What could you do to show you are caring?

Figure 6.16 IB *Learner Profile* Attribute Posters

Bridgette's Conceptualizations of Learning

In this section I describe Bridgette's conceptualizations of learning. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher interviews. It came from

the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I conducted with Bridgette. It includes descriptions of Bridgette's conceptualization of learning, the learner, the role of the teacher, and the skills and knowledge children need for kindergarten.

Learning

In my first interview with Bridgette, I asked her to define learning to me. Bridgette responded with:

> Hopefully learning is fun and it is a lifelong journey. It's something you want to do and not something that is forced upon you—and it comes from natural curiosity within.

For Bridgette, learning was fun and it was something you wanted to do—it was not forced upon you. Bridgette conceptualized learning as stemming from a 'natural curiosity within'. She told me that "Learning is a personal experience—intrinsically motivated and driven. It's a way of interpreting our world and our feelings". Bridgette conceptualized learning as helping the individual to interpret feelings and the larger world. Learning was a personal experience that was intrinsically motivated. Without intrinsic motivation, one's learning process would suffer. Bridgette explained:

> Learning stagnates when you're not intrinsically motivated and driven to explore, increase your knowledge, and apply it in a way that is meaningful to you.

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Bridgette broadened her conceptualization to include the notions of exploration and the acquisition and application of knowledge. She also conceptualized learning as being meaningful to the individual.

As our conversations ensued, Bridgette described learning as a social experience with others. It was through interacting with others that children would begin to develop higher-level thinking skills. Bridgette explained:

The opportunity to interact--that's where those higher-level skills come from. Sure, they can learn their letters and sounds, but that higher-level thinking comes through experiences.

Although Bridgette viewed learning as a social experience, she offered a qualifier. She stated, "I think it's great to give them new experiences and offer new information if they have more prior knowledge to connect to". For Bridgette, children would learn and develop higher-order thinking skills through social interactions, but their learning process required building prior knowledge and having something they could relate to within that interaction.

The Child as a Learner

Bridgette understood that her young children were often experiencing school for the first time. Sometimes getting used to school created behavior changes at home. When parents approached Bridgette with stories of meltdowns at home, she tried to reassure her parents that their child was fine and experiencing developmental growing pains. Bridgette stated:

I have parents that are horrified because all of a sudden--my child is having

meltdowns. I try to explain--it's just development. They're starting to realize

[that] I'm leaving my house. I'm going to school own my own. I have my own

friends. I am my own person--and it's a struggle for them.

Just as much as children demonstrated growing pains at home, Bridgette

experienced children expanding their horizons with her in the classroom. Bridgette

described the state of mind her students had as they entered prekindergarten, and

how school began to broaden their perspectives. She told me:

I think they are coming from such an egocentric perspective--like they're the

center of the universe. I like to bring them out of their shell and help them

see [that] you are part of something bigger. You have to consider friends and

their feelings.

For Bridgette, children who were beginning to expand their perspectives were

growing in their ability to consider the feelings of others.

Bridgette conceptualized the learner as one who would be ready for learning

when he/she was ready. She told me, "You know they are ready when they're ready.

I want to expose, expose, expose them to all these things, and it will help click for

them later". As a teacher, Bridgette wanted to 'expose' her children to as many

learning experiences as possible.

Bridgette conceptualized the learner as having the capacity to become

responsible for his/her learning. Children who were provided freedom would learn

to make responsible choices. Bridgette explained, "I like working--especially with

the 4 and 5 year olds—to give them as much freedom as possible because they become really responsible with it". Bridgette expressed this viewpoint again after participating in the focus group. She talked about how the German kindergarten children seemed to have control over their space. She said:

> I think when you respect kids and give them more control, they're able to do a lot more than you think—like change their clothes for their music and movement class.

Bridgette sees giving children freedoms in the classroom as a way of empowering students to make independent and responsible choices. Bridgette explained how this dynamic works:

> When they [children] feel empowered and they feel like their opinions and choices matter, then they're much more capable in the classroom. I feel like they're going to be more likely to do it [sit down] tomorrow if it was their choice [today]. They feel like they have the power if it's not a battle of wills.

Bridgette conceptualized children as capable learners who could broaden their egocentric perspectives and grow into responsible learners when the classroom environment permitted them freedoms to make choices and develop a sense of empowerment.

The Role of the Teacher

Bridgette conceptualized the learner as being ready to learn when he/she was ready and that prior knowledge acted like a connector to learning. In her role as a teacher, Bridgette provided multiple learning experiences to children as a way of

building up their base of prior knowledge. She told me, "Exposure helps them to develop prior knowledge so when they are ready to synthesize that information there is something there they can connect to". Building prior knowledge is one way of connecting learning to the learner, another avenue was to provide experiences that related to the learner. Bridgette explained how learning had to relate to the learner:

> Because they are coming from that very egocentric point of view, they don't get as much from my direct [teaching]. They are inside a bubble and someone is spinning things at them--and it's just bouncing off the bubble unless they can make a personal connection to it.

Bridgette viewed direct teaching to young children as ineffective. Unless learning related to the egocentric nature of the 3 or 4-year old, chances were good it would bounce off their 'bubble'. Bridgette limited her direct-teaching time with children and lengthened the experiences where children were social and interactive. Bridgette described how her conceptualization of learning related to her role as a teacher:

> I feel that the direct teach model--where we're all sitting down and we're going to learn about [the letter] 'A', trace and color pictures of 'A'—I feel that's just not authentic to them because they are not constructing their own learning.

For Bridgette, learning must be authentic to the learner, and the learner should have a hand in constructing the learning experience. As a teacher, Bridgette provided

children opportunities to construct personal learning experiences. For instance, in teaching the letters of the alphabet, Bridgette focused on children learning the letters of their own name. She explained:

> That's why with letter knowledge I try to do a lot with their names because it's really meaningful to them--and then they start to get interested in their friend's names.

Another example of Bridgette providing children with personal co-constructed learning experiences was when children engaged in the block center. Bridgette described how children could construct their name with blocks:

> If they are spending a lot of time in the construction center, [then] I try to infuse letter knowledge activities there so it is authentic and they have the control and they're interested. If they are building their name in the block center, that is going to be more meaningful.

Bridgette's conceptualizations of learning, and her role as a teacher, was not always understood by her parents. She would try to explain to parents why she was not sending worksheets home as homework. She explained to me what she tried to have her parents understand:

> Because they are not constructing their own learning experience [when using worksheets], they're not building schema. So, I try to explain we learned a lot—their work is play. It looks chaotic, but that's how it should be because they are constructing their own learning experience.

Bridgette wanted her children to build connections to learning, to others, and to the world. Her role as a teacher was to provide the kind of experiences--play and exploration—that would allow learners to connect to learning. Two-dimensional worksheets were low on her list.

Bridgette conceptualized the learner as being capable of developing higher-level thinking skill through social interaction. As a teacher, Bridgette translated the higher-level concepts/attributes within the IB *Learner Profile* into words that had meaning to her students. Bridgette explained her translation method:

> These (IB) words are kind of big words for these guys—but if you put it into context, like [the word] *reflective*--they will talk about 'I see someone being caring or being a communicator' or 'You took my toy away and you didn't ask'. IB has a formal descriptor of each profile, and I just made it a little more kid-friendly.

Bridgette took the higher-level language in the IB *Learner Profile* and made it 'kid-friendly'. In this way, her children were learning higher-order, conceptual attributes that could be used as a guide for forming relationships and making friends.

In her role as a teacher, Bridgette differentiated the capabilities of her three-year olds from her four-year olds. She explained:

> It's easy as a teacher, of course, to naturally just differentiate based on your kid's abilities. PreK4 might be writing the message of the day for me. They might be ready for that, and so you naturally differentiate because they have more letter knowledge.

Bridgette conceptualized the learner as being ready when he/she was ready.

Children who knew their letters could be expected to help with writing a message.

As a teacher, Bridgette was sensitive to the developmental levels of her children and

provided them will developmentally appropriate activities in the classroom.

Knowledge and Skills for Future Success

In one of my interviews with Bridgette, I asked her what skills she wanted

her children to have as they left her and went off to kindergarten. Her first comment

centered on the importance of children having strong social-emotional skills.

She stated:

> Social-emotional learning is really important. I want them to go on to
>
> kindergarten and have some conflict resolution skills, be able to work with
>
> peers, solve problems, work independently [in a constructive way], and be
>
> empathetic.

Bridgette's next comment addressed the importance of children having academic

skills. She told me:

> I [would] like to send them all with basic skills—like identify letters, letter
>
> sounds, compare numbers, simple story problems, add groups of things
>
> together, sort things by attributes, communicate observations, and
>
> communication skills.

Although Bridgette recognized the role academic knowledge would play in

kindergarten, she came back to the notion of how important it would be for a child

to mature and develop socially. She explained:

Eventually they're going to get the letter knowledge and learn to add

numbers together, but not everybody grows up to be a person who can

empathize with others.

For Bridgette, children who could empathize with others would be able to "help

create a better and more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate Organization,

2013).

How Bridgette Interfaced with Her Workplace Ecologies

In this section I describe how Bridgette interfaced with her workplace

environment. The data in this section was collected through the method of teacher

interviews. It came from the transcriptions of the three audio-recorded interviews I

conducted with Bridgette. This section includes a description of the stresses of being

in a school with an unacceptable TEA rating and her perspective on giving children

freedom to problem solve.

The Stresses of an Unacceptable TEA Rating

Bridgette taught in a public elementary charter school, and her school was

under the same pressure as other public elementary schools to receive a favorable

yearly rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). In 2016-17, Everest Peak

Academy was rated "Improvement Required" for meeting only 56% of its academic

indicators. The school had to develop an improvement plan, and staff was working

on strategies to improve their school rating. Bridgette explained the dilemma the

school faced—how do you integrate an exploratory, project-based program of study

with a system of high-stakes achievement testing? Bridgette described what was happening in her school:

> It [IB project-based learning] is taking a back seat because our test scores are low and so we are very much focused on teaching to the test. I think it's really hard to integrate the IB philosophy with the STAAR test. I don't see how you can measure the IB learning experience with a multiple-choice test.

For Bridgette, focusing on improving STAAR test scores was the antithesis of the IB approach to learning. However, Bridgette's counter-parts in the upper elementary grades were working hard to improve their school's rating by breaking down the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) and teaching the identified grade-level TEKS competencies. Bridgette reported that her counterparts did not appear to be making much headway with this approach:

> I feel like (here) with our academic push--with even careful planning and the breaking down of the TEKS--they're not seeing a lot of growth. Is it because students aren't motivated because the classroom setting is not engaging? Is it because they're not developmentally ready for some of those skills?

The lack of student progress on the TEKS, and the arguable necessity of achievement testing, had Bridgette questioning the wisdom of the Texas school rating system. She stated:

> It's just a weird system to come up with this list of skills they [children] must know. Why must they know these skills? We are unique and have different strengths. We should be guided towards following our strengths.

Although her upper level colleagues are under pressure, Bridgette was not immune to the challenge the school faced. With the push on the TEKS, Bridgette stated, "They're implementing a lot of what I think looks like first grade in the kindergarten classroom, and in prekindergarten, they want it to look more like kindergarten". Bridgette did not agree with this push-down of curriculum, and pushed back when she was asked to provide children with activities that she saw as beyond their capabilities. For instance, Bridgette's instructional coach instructed her to provide guided reading activities to the children in her classroom. Bridgette described to me how she responded to her coach's request. She said:

My instructional coach said, "We want to see more guided reading groups" and I pushed back and said, "It's not appropriate. It's not beneficial to many students who need help with letters to be tracking print."

Bridgette expressed another concern about the push-down of academics into prekindergarten. Bridgette worried that the time spent on more academics would displace the time children had to develop social-emotional skills. Bridgette expressed this concern:

We are pushing them for these academic skills when some of them are not ready. Some of them need to focus on getting a solid foundation of social-emotional learning first because I feel like if you skip over that, it only gets worse.

Bridgette viewed the development of social-emotional skills as coming before a concerted effort on academic learning. Bridgette stated,

I've always wondered—what's the rush? Whether they begin reading at four-years old or not until the end of first grade, they all level out at [a higher] grade.

Bridgette was not immune to the stresses her school was under with its unsatisfactory TEA rating. For Bridgette, the greater question was the wisdom of the state rating system in the first place.

Freedoms to Problem-Solve

After she participated in the focus group, Bridgette offered her views on the learning environment she saw in the German kindergarten. She was impressed with the freedom the children had in their classroom. She told me, "I was so impressed with the way the children interacted with each other—they had a lot of space to figure things out on their own and explore". Although Bridgette was impressed with the freedoms children experienced in the German classroom, she stated that some of those freedoms would not be permitted in an American classroom. Bridgette explained:

We don't really have a lot of issues where somebody is going to get poked with a stick because they're just not allowed to do that. Those kiddos were much more independent.

Bridgette understood that in her school environment, children picking up sticks and shoving them at a classmate would not be seen as appropriate. However, she still saw the value in allowing children to explore more freely. Bridgette stated, "You whack your friend with the stick and you see they're hurt--and [then] you get poked

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with a stick—and you're more careful next time". For Bridgette, children who were allowed to play with sticks would learn *how* to play with sticks.

Bridgette was also impressed with the German teachers' ability to refrain from interrupting their children's problem-solving process. She said:

> There was a long period of time where they were allowed to kind of tug and
>
> pull and try to work it out. They need that experience. It's so much more
>
> meaningful than me coming over to say "Stop, that clip is mine".

For Bridgette, giving children space to problem-solve their issues with one another was a practice that aligned with her own approach with children in her classroom.

Everest Peak Academy Focus Group

In this section I describe some of the interchanges that occurred between Bridgette and her colleague, Harper, during the Everest Peak focus group activity. Harper was a kindergarten teacher at Everest Peak. The data for this section came from the transcription of the video-taped recording of this focus group. The focus group interchanges will be discussed in chapter 7.

After viewing the clip of the German kindergarten, both Bridgette and Harper responded to the freedoms they saw in the video clip of the German kindergarten. Bridgette honed-in on the different role the teacher played, and how that different role impacted the children's learning. She stated:

> Teachers are more like a facilitator. They provided materials and
>
> opportunities for learning. I think they [children] had more opportunities to
>
> apply knowledge, increase their expressive language, and problem-solve.

Bridgette viewed the German teachers as facilitators who gave children a lot of space to talk and solve problems with one another. Bridgette was particularly impressed with the way in which the children responded to their free environment. Bridgette told me, "I was so impressed with the way the children interacted with each other—they had a lot of space to figure things out on their own and explore". Some of the space children had to explore was outside space. Harper, the kindergarten teacher, noticed that the children had the freedom to learn about academic subjects outside. She said, "They were outside—[where] they can learn science instead of sitting in a group on the carpet where the teacher's talking". Although both Bridgette and Harper were impressed with the freedom the German children had to explore, they felt that such extensive freedom would not be permitted in their classrooms. For example, Everest Peak children would not be allowed to hit each other with sticks. Bridgette stated:

> We don't really have a lot of issues where somebody is going to get poked
> with a stick because they're just not allowed to do that. Those kiddos were
> much more independent.

Bridgette understood that she could not permit her children to hit one another with sticks because in her school "they're just not allowed to do that". In fact, such an activity would be viewed not only as a hands-off activity, but also as a distraction to learning. Harper explained, "We're taught and trained that if children are challenged and on-task, that [stick play] will not happen because you are not letting them get distracted". Both Harper and Bridgette had been trained to keep children "on-task"

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and playing with sticks would be considered off-task and of no learning value. Even more importantly, stick playing would be considered unsafe and a teacher who permitted such an activity might suffer consequences for not properly managing her children. Harper explained:

> I felt that they [German children] weren't getting watched. Things could still happen. Parents will ask, 'What happened?' So, if you don't know the real story…you're supposed to be managing your classroom the right way [which means] supposed to be eyes on everybody.

While Bridgette and Harper understood the need to balance safety and freedom in their classrooms, Bridgette still saw value in the freedom the German children had to play with sticks. Bridgette said, "You whack your friend with the stick and you see they're hurt--and [then] you get poked with a stick—and you're more careful next time". Bridgette could see that children playing with sticks would learn *how* to play with sticks, and in the process, keep one another safe.

Bridgette also seemed impressed with the German teachers' ability to refrain from interrupting their children's problem-solving process. She talked about two girls tugging over a hair clip and how they were given a lot of space to work it out. Bridgette described the girls' interaction:

> There was a long period of time where they were allowed to kind of tug and pull and try to work it out. They need that experience. It's so much more meaningful than me coming over to say "Stop, that clip is mine".

For Bridgette, giving children the space to work out their own problems was more personal and meaningful than a teacher short-circuiting their attempts to problem-solve. Teachers were not the only adults that interrupted the problem-solving attempts of children—parents did as well. Bridgette described how her student's parents short-circuited their child's emerging problem-solving skills:

It's not this helicopter [parent] which I see a lot these days. There's just not that space and respect given [to children] that you're capable. [So] let's see you apply your knowledge and your social skills and work it out.

Parents who intervened too quickly to help a child problem solve an issue curtailed the development of social-emotional skills in the child. By intervening too quickly, parents truncated their child's growth, and Bridgette saw ramifications of this phenomena every day in her classroom. She explained:

I see many kindergartners who can't button their pants or zip their own jacket. I think it's because it's all done for them. I think we can give a lot of control over to the children and make everybody's life easier. I feel like that's slipping away here in America.

Bridgette viewed children as capable learners. If parents had the same perspective about their children, young students would know how to button their pants or zip their jacket--and according to Bridgette--everybody's life would be easier!

Bridgette, the Data, and the Research Questions

In this section I consider all the data I collected about Bridgette and answer the two research questions posited within this ethnographic case study. The two

research questions were an exploration into how four prekindergarten teachers articulated their conceptualizations of learning, and how their conceptualizations interfaced with the ecologies of their workplace environment. In this section I describe Bridgette's conceptualizations of learning and how her conceptualizations interfaced with her perceptions and interpretations of the ecologies of her workplace environment.

Research Question #1: Bridgette's Conceptualizations

Bridgette conceptualized learning as social, intrinsically motivated, and fun. She saw the child's readiness and prior knowledge as connectors to learning. Bridgette conceptualized the young child as 'egocentric' but capable of expanding his perspective to include the feelings of others and knowledge outside himself. She viewed children as capable learners who would acquire higher-order thinking skills when given the freedom to make choices. As a teacher, Bridgette saw play as the children's work. It was her role as a teacher to provide children with social learning experiences that related to their understandings of the world and allowed them to form sensitive relationships with others. These three constructs—her conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher--were strongly linked to one another, and they influenced the learning experiences Bridgette provided to children and the nature of interactions in her classroom.

The children in Bridgette's classroom spent a minimal amount of time in teacher-directed activities and most of their time in child-directed activities. Bridgette provided her children with special sensory activities i.e. playing in the

'snow' table, melting ice sculptures, creating art with painted feet. These sensory activities allowed children to have a hand in co-creating their learning experiences. Bridgette's children were given space to make decisions and problem solve with one another. They had the freedom to move to-and-from centers at will.

When conflict emerged in her classroom, Bridgette helped children see a friend's point of view. She helped her children move away from being 'egocentric' by creating a context around a problem, and then walking children through a thinking process that framed the conflict and suggested actions that could be chosen to solve the problem. In this way, Bridgette had interactions with her children in a manner that allowed them to develop both higher order thinking skills and social emotional skills. Bridgette saw her children as capable learners, and her interactions with them helped her children to develop into thinkers.

Bridgette's conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her role as a teacher were intertwined and influenced the learning activities she provided to children and the interactions she had with them in her classroom. Bridgette conceptualized learning as a social, intrinsically motivated experience, her children as capable learners, and her role as a teacher as a facilitator of co-constructed classroom learning experiences. Consequently, she provided children with primarily child-centered activities designed to expand their sensitivity to others and widen their understanding of the world in which they lived.

Research Question #2: Bridgette's Conceptualizations and her Workplace Ecologies

Bridgette was a prekindergarten teacher who worked in a public charter elementary school. Her school had adopted the International Baccalaureate (IB) program of study that had its own, distinct curriculum. The IB program of study strived to develop "internationally-minded people who would help create a better and more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013). The constructs Bridgette had around learning were closely associated with the exploratory and collaborative aspects of the IB program of study. Bridgette had adopted the IB program of learning and it was visible on her classroom walls, in her lesson plans, and in her interactions with children. She used the IB *Learner Profile* attributes to help children become more sensitive to others and to understand how to build relationships with peers. On the other hand, the high-stakes testing pressures that were seeping into her school did not align with her conceptualizations of learning and Bridgette was resisting their possible intrusion into her prekindergarten classroom.

In Texas, public charter schools are required to meet the same academic performance standards as any other public school. Bridgette's school had been rated "Improvement Required" by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for missing 56% of its academic indicators. While I conducted my study at Everest Peak Academy, Bridgette described some of the pressures her colleagues were having in reconciling the exploratory IB program of study with the STAAR system of testing. She also

described pushing back at her instructional coach when she instructed Bridgette to provide her children with guided reading experiences that Bridgette did not feel were age-appropriate. Bridgette was resisting the 'push-down' of academics into her classroom—her conceptualizations of learning did not support providing children with educational activities they were not ready for and her school had an IB ecology that was still the prevailing environment at the lower grade levels.

Bridgette's response to her ecological setting was two-fold: she accepted the IB program of study and rejected the high-stakes testing ecology that was trying to bring age-inappropriate activities into her classroom. Bridgette stated that the STAAR testing system was "just weird" and questioned why there was an arbitrary set of skills children must know. Bridgette resisted the 'push-down' of academics into her classroom because it did not fit with her conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and her responsibilities as a teacher.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Children Learn What Is Made Available to Them

This study was initially conceived after I had observed prekindergarten classrooms for over a decade and wondered why some children learned the alphabet through exploratory activities while other children learned the alphabet through teacher-directed instruction. My wonderings transcended the pedagogical differences I was observing and evolved into epistemological questions about how early childhood teachers were thinking about learning and teaching. I began to wonder why one teacher *thought* children would learn the alphabet best by taking it on as a project while another teacher thought children would learn the alphabet best if she taught it to them letter by letter. I also wondered—was it possible that different teachers thought about learning differently? Is that why I was seeing various approaches to teaching the alphabet in early childhood classrooms?

This study has been an exploration into how teachers think about learning or conceptualize learning. As I collected data on how four prekindergarten teachers conceptualized learning, I engaged in inductive coding of the data and allowed the themes and patterns to emerge. I realize that as a researcher that the research questions I studied, the methodology I employed, and the sites I selected created constructs around the study—and I cannot claim to be fully cognizant of the influences these structures may have had on my analysis of the data. However, the patterns and themes that did emerge were surprising to me.

I found that teachers' conceptualizations of learning were intertwined with other related conceptualizations they held around learning. I also found that these intertwined conceptualizations were linked to the learning activities teachers provided to children and the nature of the interactions children experienced in the classroom. As I conducted my research, I found myself coming back to a statement made by Goldstein (2008). He stated, "What children have the opportunity to learn depends ultimately on what their teachers make available to them" (p. 460). This felt like a very wise statement to me because based on the results of this study— what teachers made available to children in the classroom was linked to their conceptualizations of learning. Although this study focused on how teachers conceptualized learning, Adair et al. (2017) have identified other elements that can determine what children experience in the classroom. They state:

> What teachers and administrators think about young children and their families influences what they think children can handle, and this determines what they end up offering young children in everyday classroom life, even in the earliest grades (p. 328).

Adair et al. (2017) broaden the dynamics of classroom learning and describe it as a function of how teachers *and* administrators think about children *and* their parents. What children have the opportunity to learn does depend on what the adults in their world make available to them.

Talking about Conceptualizations of Learning and not Beliefs

There is a substantial body of research that has focused on exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices (Banu, 2014; Wiebe-Berry, 2006; Gutierrez, 1994; Brophy & Good, 1974; Avgitidou et al., 2013). However, the body of research on the association between teachers' beliefs and classroom enactments has been at best inconclusive (Wen et al., 2011; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002).

Researchers have attempted to figure out why the research on the association between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices has been inconclusive. One theory is that when teachers filled out surveys about their beliefs, the way in which they reported their beliefs did not necessarily reflect how they thought about teaching in the classroom (Wen et al., 2011). Although there was no clear understanding about why teachers' reported beliefs on surveys were disconnected to their observed classroom practices, in this research project, my methodology did not call for teachers to tell me about their conceptualizations of learning by responding to a survey. Instead, I asked them to describe their conceptualizations of learning to me in a direct fashion through a series of three teacher interviews. In my conversations with teachers, I asked them to describe their conceptualizations of learning (not beliefs) to me. Throughout my data collection process, I intentionally stayed away from using the word 'beliefs' in my interactions with teachers—and as I analyzed my data—I discovered that the teachers had not used the word 'beliefs' either. Throughout the data collection

process, neither of us used the phrase 'conceptualization of learning' interchangeably with the word 'beliefs'. I cannot say with certainty how using the phrase 'conceptualization of learning' instead of the word 'beliefs' may have impacted the dialogue I had with teachers, but my sense is that using the phrase 'conceptualization of learning' allowed the discussion about learning to be more neutral, and did not create an atmosphere where a teacher might feel defensive about the nature of the ideas she was expressing to me.

The Link between Conceptualizations

Throughout my conversations with the four prekindergarten teachers who participated in this study, I found the teachers to be quite forthcoming in articulating their conceptualizations of learning to me. Although there was a marked difference between how Bella conceptualized learning and how Laura, Betty, and Bridgette conceptualized learning, the teachers were cognizant and in-touch with the ideas they had around learning and teaching. In each of my interviews with a teacher, I would ask the teacher to describe her conceptualizations of learning to me. I would re-open the conversation around her conceptualizations because I wanted to uncover any new nuances to her thinking or more deeply explore any shifts in her thinking. Throughout my data collection process, I found that the conceptualizations of learning articulated by Bella, Betty, and Bridgette remained fairly consistent. However, Laura experienced some tensions around her conceptualization of learning, and later broadened both her conceptualization of learning and her conceptualization about her children's capacity to learn. Laura's

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shifts in thinking about learning are more fully discussed in this chapter in the section on the ecologies of a teacher's educational setting.

One of the key findings in this study was the discovery that teachers' conceptualizations of learning were intertwined with her conceptualizations of the learner and her conceptualization of her role as a teacher. A teacher's conceptualization of learning acted like a billowy cloud that had room for related conceptualizations of learning. In describing how they conceptualized learning, all four prekindergarten teachers described their notions about the child as a learner and their role as a teacher to me. In other words, all of the teachers described how they conceptualized their children as learners and how they conceptualized their role as a teacher—and these conceptualizations were part of the constructs they held around learning. Although Bella characterized her children's capacity for learning differently than Laura, Betty, and Bridgette--all four teachers talked about their children's capacity for learning when they talked about learning. In the same fashion, even though Bella characterized her role as a teacher differently than did Laura, Betty, and Bridgette—all four teachers talked about their role as a teacher when they talked about learning. For these four teachers, their conceptualization of learning, how they conceptualized their children's capacity for learning, and how they conceptualized their role as a teacher were *extricably* (a word used by Gill and Hoffman, 2009) intertwined with one another.

Another key finding in this study was that the teachers' conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and the role of the teacher—all three intertwined constructs—

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influenced the learning experiences they provided to children and the nature of their interactions in the classroom. For instance, Bella conceptualized learning as the acquisition of academic knowledge, the capacity of the learner as being innate, and her role as a teacher to be a disseminator of knowledge. These three constructs were directly linked to the teacher-directed activities Bella provided to children and her brisk and unsocial interactions with children in the classroom. On the other hand, Laura, Betty, and Bridgette's conceptualized learning as social and exploratory, their children as capable learners, and their role as a teacher to be a facilitator of social play. These three constructs were directly linked to the child-centered activities Laura, Betty, and Bridgette provided to children and their friendly, personal interactions with children in the classroom. Although previous research has found an inconsistent association between an early childhood teacher's beliefs and her classroom routines (Wen et al., 2011; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002), the results of this study showed a consistent link between how teachers conceptualized learning, the learner, and the role of the teacher and the learning experiences they provided children and the nature of the interactions with children in her classroom.

Teachers Co-Constructed Meaning in Their Classrooms

Vygotsky (1978) viewed the development of human consciousness as a process of "outside" social interactions and experiences moving "inward" through internal dialogue. The process of internalizing social interactions allows the merging adult to cognizant of his/her thinking which provides the underpinnings of becoming a conscious human being. The four prekindergarten teachers in this study

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could easily articulate their conceptualizations of learning because they were aware of their own thinking. They were capable of engaging in intellectual or cognizant thinking, which in turn, allowed them to form conceptualizations of learning. Teaching by nature is a social activity. The prekindergarten teachers in this study were co-constructing meaning for themselves and for their children in the classroom. Bella described learning as a partnership between a responsible teacher and a responsible student. Laura, Betty, and Bridgette describe learning as a social experience where children *grew into* becoming responsible decision-makers. Although the Bella characterized learning differently that Laura, Betty, and Bridgette, all four teachers were cognizant of how they were thinking about learning and how their thinking about learning influenced the experiences they provided to children in the classroom.

The Interface between Conceptualizations and Workplace Ecologies

Teachers' conceptualizations of learning interfaced with the ecologies of their workplace environment. Sometimes the teachers' conceptualizations of learning went unchallenged and framed their responses to the ecologies in their workplace environments. On another occasion, a teacher's conceptualization of learning was challenged by the ecologies within her workplace environment and resulted in shifts in her thinking.

In this study, the conceptualizations of learning held by Bella, Betty, and Bridgette remained unchallenged by the ecologies of their workplace environment. Although their conceptualizations went unchallenged, the responses to their

workplace ecologies were not the same. Bella's fairly entrenched conceptualizations

of learning allowed her to accept some of the ecologies of her workplace

environment (high-stakes testing pressures), and reject others (campus and

collegial initiatives). Bella's conceptualizations of learning also allowed her to accept

some of the ecologies of her workplace environment (IB program of study), and

reject others ('push-down' of academics). Betty's response to her workplace

ecologies did not follow the accept/reject pattern demonstrated by Bella and

Bridgette. Betty's conceptualizations of learning were strongly aligned with the

Head Start ecologies of her workplace environment, and she accepted her workplace

environment without reservation.

On the other hand, Laura's conceptualizations of learning were challenged by

the ecologies in her workplace environment, and after experiencing a time of

dissonance between the two, her conceptualizations of learning were altered to

better fit the ecologies of her workplace environment. Laura experienced being

caught between two different conceptualizations of learning—children learned best

through direct instruction or children learned best through exploration and play.

Schon (1983) stated that teachers who struggled with competing conceptualizations

of the learning process might find themselves in a place where they need to broaden

or redefine their deeply held beliefs about education (in Wen et al., 2011). Indeed,

Laura responded to the struggle with two competing conceptualizations by

broadening her conceptualizations of learning to include a wider view of how

children learned and a wider view of their capacity to learn. Laura's

conceptualizations of learning were challenged by her workplace environment and her conceptualizations shifted to better align with the ecologies in her educational setting.

Focus Groups: Interface between Conceptualizations and Ecologies

Although the participants in the three focus groups did not speculate about how the German teachers in the video clip were conceptualizing learning, they did however, articulate their thoughts about the role of the teacher and the nature of the activities the German teachers were providing to children. A number of focus group participants remarked on the amount of freedom and space the German kindergarteners had to explore and play (Harper, Bella, Esperanza, and Bridgette). Other participants were struck by the children's opportunity to resolve conflicts without teacher intervention (Bella, Laura, and Bridgette). Bridgette saw the role of the German teachers as being facilitators of learning. Esperanza and Nelly commented that the independence experienced by children in the German kindergarten was allowing them to acquire life skills and prepare for future academic learning. The majority of the focus group participants agreed that the freedoms in the German classroom would not be permitted in their educational settings. A number of participants said that children thrusting sticks at one another (a scene in a park in the video) would not be considered acceptable play in their classrooms or school environments (Laura, Esperanza, Claire, Bridgette, and Harper). There was agreement among focus group participants that the ecologies of their educational settings were focused on keeping children safe, and would

prohibit teachers providing children with the expansive freedoms afforded the German kindergartners. The focus group activity illuminated the differences between the ecology of freedom in the German school setting and the ecology of safety in American school settings. Generally, the focus group activity did not provide the researcher with additional information about the conceptualizations of learning held by individual teachers and/or participants, but it did draw out cultural contrasts of how young children experienced learning in classrooms in different countries.

Implications for Educational Initiatives and Reforms

In this study, teachers' conceptualizations of learning determined how they responded to the ecologies of their workplace environment. Conceptualizations that were fairly entrenched and unchallenged allowed the teacher to accept the ecologies that were aligned with her conceptualizations and reject those that did not. The teachers made the decisions about what they would bring to their children. Teachers are actually active policy makers who make daily decisions about what gets taught to children in the classroom (Lipsky, 1980; Heineke et al. 2015) or what is provided to children (Goldstein, 2008). In general, teachers weed through mountainous amounts of knowledge and information, and bring forth to their students what they deem relevant, appropriate, and necessary (Wen et al., 2011; Clark & Peterson, 1986). This weeding-through-information also includes a teacher's decision to enact state or local educational reforms or initiatives. Lipsky (1980) proposed that teachers make "street level" decisions about curricula,

instruction, and classroom activity. Early childhood teachers, in effect, have the ability to create their own educational policies about what they provide to children. The gap between what is expected by others (administrators, legislators, policy makers), and what teachers actually bring to children can pose a real problem to school districts (Jurow, 2016) --especially when high stakes testing holds teachers and schools accountable for what children know. This gap occurs because teachers are rarely the "go-to" people for policy makers that initiate educational reforms. Educational reforms might be more successful if teachers' views and reflections on learning and teaching were taken into consideration during their formation (Wu & Rao, 2011). The results of this study support the notion that teachers will accept the reforms and initiatives that align with their conceptualizations of learning and reject those that do not, regardless if they come from the state, a district, or a colleague. The teachers' patterns of accepting or rejecting ecologies did position the teacher as the policy-maker of the classroom—and her decisions determined what she provided and did not provide to children in the classroom.

Implications for Professional Development

The four prekindergarten teachers in this study accepted ecologies in the workplace environment that aligned with their conceptualizations of learning-- whether those ecologies or initiatives originated from the state (high-stakes testing pressures) or from a school district (IB curriculum). The teachers also rejected ecologies or initiatives that originated from the state (high-stakes testing pressures), from a school district (*7 Mindsets*), or a colleague (TEKS timeline). In this

study, teachers' conceptualizations of learning were found to be linked to the learning experiences provided to children and the nature of the interactions in the classroom. Previous research has concluded that it is important to understand teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices because they appear to change teacher behaviors such as classroom management, instruction, pedagogical methods, and planning. As teachers change their practice, they impact student experiences in the classroom (Banu, 2014; Wiebe-Berry, 2006; Gutiervez, 1994; Brophy and Good, 1974; Avgitidou et al 2013).

The findings in this study support the notion that teachers' conceptualizations of learning have the potential to change classroom practices. Pratt and Martin (2017) found that that reflecting on beliefs is integral to changing teaching practices because of the entangled nature of beliefs and practice. The findings in this study suggest that the pathway to changing teachers' classroom practices is through their conceptualizations of learning, the learner, and the role of the teacher—as these three conceptualizations are intertwined with one another. Professional development activities that include reflection exercises that asked teachers to articulate their conceptualizations of learning might allow teachers to consider new ways of thinking (Moje and Wade, 2009). When teachers open their conceptualizations to new experiences and information, sometimes the overall belief structure shifts to allow for new beliefs, which then allows the structure to reach a stage of equilibrium once again (Pratt and Martin (2017). However,

sometimes belief structures are opened to new ways of thinking about learning and old ways of thinking are not dislodged (Leaupepe, 2009).

The results of this study suggest that a teacher's conceptualization of learning is intertwined with her conceptualizations of the learner and her role as a teacher. Professional development activities that consider these *three* aspects of how teachers think about learning may prove to be more effective in introducing new ideas to a teacher that might impact the learning experiences she provides to children and the nature of the interactions within her classroom.

Appendix A: Teacher Consent Form

Title: Early Childhood Teachers' Conceptualizations of Learning
Conducted by: Judy Szilagyi, University of Texas at Austin
Contact Information: 451-7361 Ext. 221

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study
You have been asked to participate in a research study on how teachers' conceptualization learning. The purpose of this study is to explore how early childhood teachers conceptualize learning and discover if those conceptualizations impact the teacher/child interactions in the classroom.

What will you to be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a video-taped focus group.
- Allow the researcher to observe you three times in your classroom.
- Participate in three audiotaped interviews.

This study will span 20 weeks and require parent consent for the classroom visitations.

What are the risks involved in this study?
There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
- A richer understanding of your thinking about learning and teaching.
- Possible changes in classroom practices.

Do you have to participate?
No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with the University of Texas at Austin in anyway. If you would like to participate, please return this consent form to Judy Szilagyi. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?
You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

What are my confidentiality or privacy protections when participating in this research study?

This study is confidential. Your name, the names of your students, colleagues, and school (name and location) will not be included in the researcher's dissertation, which will be submitted as the final project in a PhD course of study in early childhood development to the University of Texas at Austin.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?
Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Judy Szilagyi at 451-7361 Ext. 221 or at 512-970-1953.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?
For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation
If you agree to participate please return this form to Judy Szilagyi.

Signature
You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____
Participant's Printed Name

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

_____
Researcher's Printed Name: Judy Szilagyi

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature: Judy Szilagyi   Date

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