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EXPLORING HISPANIC TEACHER CANDIDATES' BELIEFS ABOUT
THE VALUE OF PLAY IN CHILDREN'S LEARNING
AND DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation

by

DIANA H. CORTEZ-CASTRO

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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December 2015

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ABSTRACT

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Play has been globally recognized as valuable to children's learning and development (Frost et al., 2012). The value of play is acknowledged as a developmentally appropriate practice in part because it fosters cognitive, physical, emotional, and social benefits to children. Play is also known as a human right that should be protected. However, in the past five decades there has been a significant decline of play due to multiple and interrelated factors, which are having dire consequences on children's learning and developmental possibilities (Almon & Miller, 2011; Gray, 2013).

Due to the challenges posed by the current educational climate, in South City, Hispanic teacher candidates have reportedly grappled with making sense between the rhetoric and reality of the educational value of play. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study with constructivist grounded theory methods was to explore teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play and to understand what influences possibly shaped these beliefs.

This study took place in a Hispanic Serving University along the United States-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley. Data consisted of intensive interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data analysis involved transcription of interviews, the use of open coding and focused coding to identify patterns of salient meaning of data, which resulted in categories,

themes and concepts that led to an interpretive theoretical understanding of the studied phenomenon grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Findings suggest that participants in this study value play in their everyday life and in education. Also, findings indicate that participants are still playing with a conceptualization of play. Participants' beliefs about play appeared to be shifting, as they now believe in the educational value of play for children's learning and development. A significant experience in teacher candidates' reconceptualization of play appeared to be their participation in a service learning play day. Data revealed that participants' beliefs about play were influenced by multiple and interrelated factors such as their play histories, which were constructed through everyday and educational experiences within a social, cultural and historical context (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my four precious and beloved children, Isaac Alexander, Emily Rose, Michael Aaron, and Matthew Ezekiel. Each of you has inspired me and given me the strength and motivation to continue to challenge myself despite the many obstacles and adversities that I faced during this transformative journey - love you always!

This dissertation is also dedicated to my devoted husband Lupe, who patiently and lovingly encouraged and supported me through this dissertation process filled with undertakings that were strenuous and insurmountable - I love you!

Con admiración, gratitud e y respeto, también dedico este logro a mis padres Oliverio y Adelina, ya que gracias al apoyo y ayuda que me brindaron incondicionalmente, he logrado terminar mis estudios de Doctorado - ¡se les quiere mucho!

Lastly, I also dedicate this research study to my students who have shaped the way I view teaching, learning, and the value I give to playing both in everyday life and in school.

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“And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”

— The Alchemist, Paulo Coelho

Although this doctoral excursion has been transformative, it has also been long and challenging. Yet, I must acknowledge that I have not been alone in this voyage. As such, I must express my sincere gratitude to those who have conspired in helping me to complete this dissertation in some form or another.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Historically, play has been perceived as a complex yet necessary social cultural human phenomenon that continues to transcend over time with the emerging challenges of an evolving global society (Brooker, Blaise, & Edwards, 2014). Although the literature on play reveals that it is difficult to define (e.g., Gordon, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997), most play scholars agree that it has some of following characteristics which are based on the seminal work of Huizinga (1955), and of Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1983): (a) pleasurable, (b) voluntary or freely chosen, (c) non literal or symbolic, (d) requires active engagement, (e) free of external rules, (f) focuses on the means rather than the end results or outcomes (as cited in Sluss, 2015, pp. 10-11).

The value of children's play within the context of early childhood is recognized by diverse scholars, theorists, and practitioners and also by national and global organizations. For example, children's play is empirically underpinned as a developmentally appropriate practice, recognized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which acknowledges that play fosters all aspects of young children's development from birth to age eight (Almon, 2003, 2004; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fler, 2013; Pellegrini, 2011; Wood, 2013).

However, in recent decades, the educational value of play and its integration into early childhood classrooms has been questioned and challenged because of different societal obstacles (Frost, 2012; Wood, 2014).

The literature reveals that these barriers include: (a) the ambiguity about how play is defined in the existing literature, (b) the paradoxical belief that play is the opposite of work/learning, (c) a growing emphasis on accountability and measurable outcomes, (d) contextual and social cultural issues due to a rapidly changing society, (e) a variety of technological advances, and, (f) continued controversies about the teacher's role in children's play (Clements, 2004; Frost et al., 2012; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014b; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Johnson, Eberle, & Henricks, 2015; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Lyllemyr, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Reifel, 2011, 2014; Roopnarine, 2011, 2014; Wood, 2013). Consequently, taken as a whole, the preceding factors are contributing to the decline of play from diverse early childhood settings (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2011; Frost, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009).

In this light, some researchers argue that emphasis is given to literacy and numeracy skills that are measurable for assessment purposes and that play is being utilized as reward activity after children finish their work. As stated by Duarte and Morales-Flores (2012) "...play is being eliminated in many schools and is frowned upon in many circles in the United States as a frivolous activity that is considered surplus energy" (p. 20). Christie and Roskos (2006) also agree with the latter notion and remind us that, "Play is being shunted aside in early childhood programs in favor of more direct forms of instruction that address the new "pre-K basics" of language, early literacy, and numeracy skills" (p. 57).

Current emphasis on standardized test performance often forces teachers to choose between time for play and time for implementing required prescriptive lessons to meet the expectations of a push down curriculum (Miller & Almon, 2009; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010; Trawick-Smith, 2012). As such, teachers in public schools are grappling with curricular

tensions about whether to integrate play in their classrooms, and how to interweave play into the required prescriptive curriculum (Fleer, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2007, 2012; Reifel, 2014; Wood, 2013).

A number of researchers (e.g., Johnson et al., 2015; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) suggest that the decline of play in early childhood environments is happening in part because of the current contrasting perspectives that exist among advocates of a more constructivist, play-oriented curriculum, and proponents of a more behaviorist, didactic, and prescriptive approach to early childhood education. Paradoxically, although play is recognized as a vehicle for learning and development, children's play is seemingly being replaced by didactic instruction and what seems to be an endless amount of work sheets with the purpose of producing outcomes that can be measured (Brooker et al., 2014; Bodrova & Leong, 2003a). Essentially, these foregoing ideas stem from the American society belief that children are required to work in school and not to waste time on activities that do not show evidence with quantifiable results (Chudacoff, 2011; Frost, 2012; Gray, 2013; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Because of the rise of these societal expectations, practicing teachers appear to feel under pressure to defend their use of play as a learning tool in their classrooms from different stake holders who want to see physical evidence of learning such as work sheets or formal tests (Almon & Miller, 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Miller & Almon, 2009). Bodrova and Leong (2003a) concur with this point of view and argue, "These teachers must increasingly defend the use of play in their classrooms to principals, parents, and teachers of higher grades" (p. 50). In the same way, Goldstein (2007) notes "...the pressures caused by the standards' expectations for academic achievement and accountability have made it difficult for many kindergarten teachers

to justify the use of play, integrated instruction, or other developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms” (p. 41).

Contemporary research validates teachers’ ability to teach young children in a developmentally appropriate way that does not paradoxically separate play from learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Goldstein, 2007; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Moyles, 1989; Saracho, 2012; Van Hoorn, Monighan Nourot, Scales & Rodriguez Alward, 2015; Wood, 2013). Researchers agree that teachers influence children’s play in direct and indirect ways by the opportunities they create and through the ones that they do not provide for students (Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 2003a). In order to meet the demands of the current educational climate, early childhood teachers have to be intentional and knowledgeable about play in relation to learning, and must be able to utilize play as an essential classroom tool to guide and connect children’s learning with current early standards of education (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Chowdhury & Rivallard, 2012; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2015; Johnson et al., 2005; Johnson, Sevimli-Celide, & Al-Mansour, 2013; Nell, Drew & Bush, 2013; Thomas, Warren, & de Vries, 2011).

As some researchers have argued, teachers’ struggles with regard to play may be due to the rise of different cultural and societal challenges that include their own ideas, values, and beliefs about the usefulness of play in the classroom, as well as the current pressures to meet the demands of a push-down curriculum in the 21st century (Bodrova & Leong, 2003a; Johnson et al., 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009; Vera & Geneser, 2012). Significantly, some studies, have also suggested that beliefs affect teachers’ ideas about teaching, which in turn can impact their instructional decisions in the classroom (Calderhead, 1996; Nespor, 1986).

Due to the centrality of play in children’s learning and development (Brooker et al., 2014; Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006), the challenges posed by the current educational context require an examination of preservice teachers’ ideas about the value of play prior to their transition to in-service teaching. As Vera and Geneser (2012) remind us, “This “reality” should be analyzed with pre-service teachers to infer solutions before they enter the teaching force” (p. 9). In essence, to achieve the type of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to make sense of play and to hopefully utilize it to teach in the 21st century, teacher educators need to facilitate pedagogical and curricular opportunities for teacher candidates¹ to gain academic knowledge about play (Frost et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; NCATE; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). In such a viewpoint, it may be argued that seeing play in this way might help teacher candidates draw from this knowledge in order to use play as a pedagogical tool to facilitate meaningful learning in their practice as future teachers (Johnson, 1994; Johnson et al., 2005; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). However, there is limited contemporary empirical evidence about how to better prepare future teachers with academic knowledge about the usefulness of play in the classroom (Nell, et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2013; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). Correspondingly, Johnson et al., (2005) remind us that the notions that early childhood teachers have about play in early childhood classrooms depend largely on the preparation that these teachers received while they were students, which blend with their own personal beliefs about play (Richardson, 2003).

Because of the limited literature on teacher candidates’ beliefs about play (e.g., Sherwood, 2009; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010, 2013), having an understanding of these beliefs could be a useful step in shaping pedagogical and curricular experiences in teacher education that

¹ The phrase teacher candidate or teacher candidates will be used throughout this study to refer to the participants.

could possibly assist teacher candidates in recognizing that their beliefs can be a powerful force in shaping their future teaching.

As indicated above, this suggests that future teachers should not see play and learning as separate entities (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006) but rather, teacher candidates should be familiar with contemporary scholarship that confirms that play is a powerful tool for learning and development (Broadhead et al., 2011; Brodova, 2003a; Brodova, 2005; Ciolan, 2013; Goldstein, 2007; Wood, 2013). As future professionals, teacher candidates must be prepared to work with the probability of a prescribed curriculum and still be able to teach in a developmentally appropriate way that interweaves time to integrate play into the early childhood classroom (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dietze & Kashin, 2012).

To summarize, investigating teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play in relation to learning and development from a foundational standpoint during their teacher education, is an important step towards addressing play in early childhood education given the current curricular and pedagogical tensions that undeniably continue to exist (Hedges, 2014; Johnson, 1994; Sherwood & Riefel, 2010, 2013; Vera & Geneser, 2012; Wood, 2013, 2014). For such reasons, in the following sections I explore the background of the problem for this present study.

Background of the Problem

What is the value of play? Historically, empirical scholarship has consistently shown that play has value in early childhood education (Brooker et al., 2014; Bruner, 1972, 1983; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Fler, 2013; Piaget, 1951/1962; Sluss, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, 2013, 2014; Vanhoorn et al., 2015). In fact, as Sluss (2015) reminds us, "...Three centuries of research support the value of play" in early childhood (p. 5). Moreover, play is considered by several root scholars and practitioners to be a fundamental part of the curriculum in the early grades

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). As such, in what follows, I briefly talk about the some of the ways in which play is recognized as valuable.

Play and Constructivism

The literature reveals that the value of children’s play in learning and development has been empirically recognized by the seminal work two prominent theorists of constructivism, and cognitive development, mainly, Jean Piaget (1951/1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) (Barlett, 2011). Granted that each scholar developed their own theories on how children learn, they both recognized that children advance cognitively when engaged in active learning through a process known as constructivism as opposed to behaviorism (Lourenço, 2012).

While different researchers consistently point to the differences in Piaget’s (1951/1962) (cognitive constructivism) and Vygotsky’s (1978) (social cultural constructivism) theoretical ideas, others (e.g., Göncü & Gaskins, 2011; Gaskins 2014) argue that their theoretical work should be seen as complementary because both offered significant insights into children’s development. Specifically, the work of these two theorists is underpinned by a constructivist approach to learning that includes play as an important vehicle through which children make sense of their emerging life experiences (Frost et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2005).

Play and Curriculum

The notions that play should be an essential part of the early childhood curriculum began with Froebel (1887), who is known as the father of kindergarten (Platz & Arellano, 2011). Froebel (1887) combined different principles based on the work of Rousseau, Comenius, Schiller and his own experiences to “...formulate not just an activity-based curriculum, with objects inspired by physical science, but a play-based curriculum” (Brosterman, 1997). As Frost (2010) reminds us, “Froebel’s influence on the role of play, nature, and the outdoors in American

education, especially kindergartens and child development centers, is perhaps unsurpassed” (Frost, 2010, p.30).

While recognizing the value of play, several experts have created curriculums that use some form of play pedagogy to enhance children’s learning and development (Wood, 2013; 2014). As such, research has shown that play-based approaches and curriculums can result in positive outcomes not only for the learners who participate in these types of curricular activities, but society benefits as well (Frost et al., 2012). The longitudinal and experimental Perry Preschool/High Scope study provides such an example. This curriculum utilized a learn-and-teach-through-play approach based on the constructivist underpinnings of Piaget (the child is an active learner) and Vygotsky (learning occurs in a social context where teachers scaffold children’s learning) (Trawick-Smith, 2012).

Another play based curriculum that showed a positive relationship between play and learning was the Learning Games: The Abecedarian Curriculum (Sparling, Ramey & Ramey, 2007). This curriculum was used as the treatment in the longitudinal, randomized Abecedarian study in the early 1970’s. According to Sparling et al., (2002) “The Learning Games curriculum consists of more than 200 specified activities in social-emotional, literacy, oral language, cognitive, and motor development” (p.111). In addition, Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2006) point out that, “Longitudinal results indicated that children in the project had higher scores on tests of cognitive ability from preschool to age 21, and higher reading and math achievement from elementary school to age 21, completed more years of education, were more likely to attend college than children in the control group” (p. 24).

The literature demonstrates that several scholars such as Van Hoorn et al., (2015) value play and have written entire books on how and why to integrate play as part of the early childhood curriculum. Van Hoorn et al., (2015) affirm that:

“A play center curriculum is not a laissez-fair curriculum in which anything goes. It is a curriculum that uses the power of play to foster children’s development. It is an emergent curriculum in which teachers take an active role in balancing spontaneous play, guided play, directed play, and teach-directed activities”(p.4).

The scholarship of Van Hoorn et al., (2015) illustrates that play should be part of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in which the teacher plays a critical role in children’s play. In particular, the authors also stress that the integration of play into the curriculum effectively addresses standards that can be met through a combination of spontaneous and guided play activities that are facilitated by a knowledgeable and intentional teacher. In this light, Van Hoorn et al., (2015) recommend that play needs to take place in an intentionally well designed learning environment that is not limited to the indoor classroom in which the teacher plays a key role in creating these play opportunities (p. 17). As indicated above, play has been an integral part of diverse approaches and curriculums in the field of early childhood education despite “...the ongoing tensions between policy, theory and practice” (Wood, 2014, p. 145).

Benefits of Play

Inspired by the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of Froebel (1887), Piaget (1951/1962) and Vygotsky (1978) along with other leading theorist, numerous contemporary scholars have conducted empirical research and confirm that play impacts children’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical growth and development in a multitude of ways (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). These findings are critical to schools and to society

as a whole because research has persistently exposed that a child who receives a well-rounded education, tends to do well in school and eventually becomes a good citizen that contributes to society (Montessori, 1967).

As much scholarship reveals, there are numerous benefits from play opportunities given that children don't just play with objects; they play with words, ideas, actions, emotions and social roles (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Duarte, Benavidez, & Cortez-Castro, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Wood, 2013, 2014). As stated by Duarte, Benavidez & Cortez-Castro (2009), "Childhood play is an important foundation for risk taking, problem solving, learning, and academic success. In this light, in the section below, I examine some of the inherent benefits of play.

Cognitive Benefits of Play. In terms of cognitive development, contemporary scholarship confirms that there is a strong relationship between play and the strengthening and augmentation of cognitive abilities (Ginsburg, 2007; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988, 2002; Siefert, 2013). Above all, the seminal work of Piaget (1951/1962), Vygotsky (1978) and others (e.g., Smilansky, 1968, Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990) has shown that mainly dramatic play, or make-believe play, increases different cognitive capabilities in young children. For example, Seifert (2013) purports that, "As Piaget emphasized and subsequent research has generally confirmed, make-believe play both stimulates and uses young children's ability to represent objects and activities" (p. 27). Additionally, in a recent publication, Runco and Cayirdag (2013) found that imaginative play allows for creative thinking to unfold based on the multiple possibilities that it affords children in making sense of diverse situations or concepts. Although its value has been questioned (e.g, Lillard, et al., 2013) much literature supports that play offers multiple benefits to children's cognitive development (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

Social and Emotional Benefits of Play. Like cognitive development, emotional competence is essential to children's academic success because it includes the capacity to regulate a variety of social and emotional skills that are needed in order to be successful both academically and socially (Denham, Zinsser & Brown, 2013). These types of skills play a critical role in helping children cope with stressful situations through self-regulation and in being able to form relationships with teachers and with classmates (Denham et al., 2013). Social competence is critical to children's overall success in school and it also impacts other learning domains such as the cognitive and the physical domains (Denham et al., 2013). As, Denham et al., (2013), remind us:

“In particular when children enter school with friends, are well liked, are able to make and sustain new friendships, and are able to initiate positive relationships with their teachers, all of which are supported by emotional competence, they also feel more positive about school, participate in school more, and achieve more than children who are not described this way (p. 67).

In this view, children need to engage in activities that allow them to build their social competence by engaging and negotiating in social situations with others. In doing so, children develop intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills that are needed to participate with others in a social environment.

Other researchers agree with the benefits of play to social competence, in particular, Copple & Bredekamp (2009) coincide that “Play, particularly complex dramatic or make-believe play, is a crucial vehicle allowing children to develop and practice self-regulation skills” (p. 200). From this perspective, play has been found to be a valuable tool for children's social and emotional development.

Physical Benefits of Play. The literature reveals that there are physical benefits in children's play as they actively participate in running, jumping, climbing, and chasing after each other as part of their play (Pellegrini, 2005, 2008; Jarrett, 2002, 2014). In play, children are able to develop locomotor skills (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellegrini, 2011). Locomotor play, which could mean an array of multidimensional play activities, could include a play episode such as running while pretending to be Bat-Man, while thinking about where to hide, which allows for children to utilize different aspects of development simultaneously (Pellegrini & Holmes, 2006; Pellegrini, 2011). One way in which children can achieve physical, social, and academic benefits is through recess where opportunities for multidimensional play is afforded (Jarrett, 2002, 2014; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Pellegrini, 2011).

According to Duarte and Cortez-Castro (2015), "In a recent report titled, *The Crucial Role of Recess in School*, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) presented evidence for the many benefits of recess to children's overall social, emotional and cognitive development" (p. 8). Recess, unlike physical education in school, allows children to engage in free and unstructured play. Importantly, this type of play allows for multiple opportunities for children to socialize with others and in the process, children also get to be active and develop the motor abilities to control their bodies and to improve kinesthetic capabilities and locomotor development (Duarte & Cortez-Castro, 2015; Jarrett, 2002, 2014; Pellegrini, 2011).

In recess, children have multiple opportunities to learn (Jarrett, 2014). For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) explain that "Through play at recess, children learn valuable communication skills, including negotiation, cooperation, sharing, and problem solving skills as well as coping skills, such as perseverance and self-control" (p. 184). The benefits of playing in recess for physical development as well as for other forms of development are

numerous as indicated by several researchers (Jarrett, 2002, 2014; Pellegrini & Holmes, 2005). In talking about play, The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) concurs with this notion and argues that, "...it affords a time to rest, play, imagine, think, move, and socialize (p. 183).

From this view, play is beneficial for children's physical development. As previously discussed, through recess, children have ample opportunities to choose their play and whether to play alone or with other classmates. Playing in recess has the potential to provide children with multiple opportunities to develop social, cognitive, physical and even moral skills in a stress free and fun environment through self-chosen activities (Jarett, 2002; 2014).

As indicated above, the literature reveals that there are many benefits of play for children's learning and development (Brooker et al., 2011; Jarett, 2002, 2014; Pellegrini, 2011).

National and Global Support for Play

Globally speaking, although children's play might differ in different parts of the world, all children play in one form or another as proposed by diverse scholars (Frost et al., 2012; Lester & Russell, 2010, 2014; Pellegrini, 2011). Through the philosophical and theoretical influence of the scholars mentioned above, and other recognized researchers, the significance of play in early childhood education has also been acknowledged and documented by national and global organizations, agencies and groups (Duarte & Morales-Flores, 2012; Frost et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2015; Wood, 2013, 2014). Importantly, these agencies advocate for early childhood education and children's human need and right to play (Lester & Russell, 2014).

As Duarte & Cortez-Castro (2015) remind us, "The conversation of children's rights is not a new one..." however, the fact that play is recognized globally, speaks to its value (p. 2).

Children's rights to play have been recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 31 (United Nations, 1989). Nearly every country in the world has ratified

article 31 of the Convention of the Rights of the child (CRC) and recognizes play as a human right. Unfortunately, the United States is one of the countries that still has not ratified article 31 of the CRC (Sluss, 2015). Unambiguously, article 31 of the CRC states the following:

1. Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity.

From this perspective, as an international treaty, Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) acknowledges the child's right to play and more importantly it also demonstrates that play is recognized as a valuable human need that should be advocated for around the world (Duarte-Morales-Flores, 2012; Duarte & Cortez-Castro, 2015; Lester & Russell, 2014).

Importantly, since 1926, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which is considered the largest early childhood organization in the world, recognizes the significance of play by recommending that teachers integrate it as a core element of a developmentally appropriate curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Significantly, the recommendations presented in NAEYC's position statement are scientifically grounded in empirical evidence on the benefits of play to all areas of growth and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In its most recent edition, NAEYC's recognition of play is more evident than in its prior position statement. As Copple & Bredekamp (2009) remind us, "...the 2009 position statement (for DAP) says more about play than any previous statement has done" (p. 329).

Another organization that advocates for children's right to play includes, the International Play Association (IPA). According to Frost (2010) this organization is "...the leading international organization committed to the major purpose of promoting the child's right to play" (p. 134). Similarly, The Association for Childhood International (ACEI) is another institution that "...recognizes the need for children of all ages to play and affirms the essential role of play in children's lives" (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 33). In this light, Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) remind us that, "ACEI believes that play enhances learning and development for children of all ages, cultures, and domains" (p. 34). Presently, emerging organizations such as the Alliance for Childhood, The National Institute for Play, KaBoom, and The Voice of Play, have also surfaced to endorse children's right to play (Frost, 2012, p. 126).

Taken as a whole, incontestably, decades of empirical investigations grounded in the seminal scholarship of respected educators, scholars, theorists and multiple organizations, verify that play has a vital role in the optimal growth, learning and development of young children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014b; Pellegrini, 2011) and as such, it should be a fundamental element "...within a classroom setting" in the 21st century (Orttlieb, 2010, p. 244). Although the value of children's play has been well documented, paradoxically, recent evidence shows that children's time for play continues to decrease (Gray, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009). In the section that follows, I briefly touch on some of the multiple barriers to children's play that appear to impede children from reaping the benefits of play (Gray, 2013, Frost, 2012).

Multiple Barriers to Children's Play

In spite of the reliable and multiple validations for the importance of the value of play in children's learning and development, a mounting body of research shows that play is being

eliminated or reduced from early childhood settings (Almon, 2004; Almon & Miller, 2009; Elkind, 2010; Singer et al., 2003; Singer et al., 2006; Trawick-Smith, 2012; Whitebread, 2012; Wood, 2013). For example, Elkind (2010), a recognized scholar and advocate of children's play in the field of education, posed the following question, "...if play is that important, why is it disappearing?" This question remains relevant today and resonates amongst different play scholars, educators and advocates who show concern for the perceived expulsion of play from early childhood environments (Barlett, 2011; Stout, 2011). As a reaction to the perceived disappearance of play from the lives of children, through their individual and collective scholarship, several researchers have expressed their views through their relevant research on varied factors that have contributed to the loss of play from diverse early childhood settings. In the sections that follow, I present some of these perceived views regarding the decline of children's play.

Much literature indicates that, "...multiple forces are interacting to effectively reduce children's ability to reap the benefits of play" (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 188). As previously mentioned in this chapter, the barriers to children's play are well documented and include the following: (a) the ambiguity about how play is defined, (b) the paradoxical belief that play is the opposite of work, (c) a growing emphasis on accountability and measurable outcomes, (d) contextual and cultural issues due to a rapidly changing society, (e) a variety of technological advances, and (f) continued controversies about the teachers involvement in play (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Elkind, 2007a; Frost, 2010; Fler, 2013; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014c; Riojas-Cortez, 2004; Singer et al., 2003).

Numerous researchers and scholars have noted that a noteworthy and recurring issue with the use of play in early childhood settings seems to be the ambiguous definition of play

(Ailwood, 2003; Burghardt, 2011; Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Pellegrini, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wood, 2013). Defining play is complex because it is a process, and as such, it involves a multitude of dynamic elements that happen simultaneously in each individual's mind based on his/her background knowledge and culture (Burghardt, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Also, play impacts all domains of development at an individual level, which makes it difficult to define (Burghardt, 2011; Tudge et al., 2011). As Fromberg and Bergen (2006) remind us, "The difficulty lies in the use of the term play as both a *noun* and a *verb*" (p. xviii). Different researchers agree that because there is no clear definition of what play is in the literature, it can be potentially difficult for teachers to include play in early childhood classrooms (Johnson et al., 2005; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014; Trawick-Smith, 2012; Wood, 2013).

Another explanation of why play is being pushed out of various early childhood environments seems to be the paradoxical belief that there is a divide between play and work, and play and learning (Wood, 2013). Decades of research reveal that play and learning are not different enterprises but rather complementary elements that simultaneously influence each other (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006). In a recent publication by *Play England*, the author's main message is that this dichotomy should not exist (2010). According to several scholars, Maria Montessori (1967) could have contributed to this dichotomy (Johnson et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2013). As confirmed by Johnson, et al., (2013), "...the confusion concerning play and work to some degree may be attributed to Maria Montessori, who said that play is the child's work" (p. 265). Like Montessori (1967), DiVries (2001), is another academic who endorses the idea of work activities for children in early childhood education.

In line with other contemporary scholar's view (e.g., Broadhead et al., 2011; Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Wood, 2013) Johnson et al., 2013, insist on the following, "Play is

not work, nor is it the opposite of work” (p. 265). Scholars and practitioners agree that children’s play and learning are inseparable, because through play children feel empowered to question, to test their hypothesis, and through their own discovery, they make sense of their emerging world. As affirmed by Pramling Samuelson and Johansson (2006), “ Play and learning are dimensions that stimulate each other and could be seen as an indivisible entirety, which is a part of children’s experiencing, and which helps them create an understanding of their surrounding world in a life-long process”(p. 64). As a final point in this section, Stewart Brown, a respected medical doctor and founder of the National Institute for Play states, “Play isn’t the enemy of learning, it’s learning’s partner. Play is like a fertilizer for brain growth. It’s crazy not to use it” (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, p. 101).

A growing emphasis on standards, assessment and accountability has reduced opportunities to integrate play in early childhood settings because questions regarding its value to learning continue to surface according to several recognized scholars (Almon, 2004; Broadhead et al., 2011; Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009; Wood, 2013, 2014; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2004). In fact, as stated by Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2004), “...attacks on play and overemphasis on cognitive skills have occurred since the late 1950’s” (p. 2). In addition, Oliver and Klugman (2006) further note, “Historically, children’s education in the United States has been guided by content standards in grades K through 12 and – in contrast – by child development principles in the form of “developmentally appropriate practice” during the preschool years” (p. 13). However, in recent times this debate has intensified because of the persistent idea that “earlier is better” (Elkind, 2007a, 2010) and the increasing societal inclination towards productiveness. Collectively, these social cultural forces have given rise to today’s educational environment that is strongly influenced by early learning standards and assessments for academic attainments that

need to be quantifiable beginning in the early grades (Almon, 2003, 2004; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Zigler, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004). As Frost et al., (2012) remind us, “Play is not testable, so it is often eliminated from school activity in spite of research that demonstrates the many benefits associated with play” (p.22). For example, Fisher et al., (2008), found that the reduction or exclusion of play as part of the curriculum and its substitution with prescriptive, didactic lessons are on the rise in early childhood classrooms across the United States.

Play experts agree that a consequence of today’s rapidly changing global society is the apparent loss of children’s play from different social environments (Frost, 2010; Frost, 2012; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Wood, 2013). As a human activity, play is culturally, socially, and historically constructed and at the same time, it mutually affects the cultural and social dynamics of these elements and shapes history in the process (Tudge, et al., 2011). What is also important to consider, is that the opportunities for play and the types of play that are available for children are dependent on the beliefs of the adults who may provide the attitude, time, material and environment to afford play possibilities (Johnson et al., 2005; Tudge, et al., 2011). However, these play opportunities are again dependent on the significance and value that is given to play.

The literature reveals that different cultures value and react differently to play (Tudge et al., 2011). According to Elkind (2007a), in the 21st century, families live a hurried life and face new challenges because of changing family configurations, time limitations, and fear. These challenges might include that both parents have to work and that the family is also possibly financially supported by a single parent (Elkind 2001, 2007a). These foregrounding issues might cause parents to limit their children’s play due to time constraints, safety concerns, and to the importance given to structured after school activities. Furthermore, the literature illustrates that

similar to many parents, administrators and legislators have fears about the safety of children playing outdoors (Ginsburg, 2007).

In addition, an integral part of today's shifting society that is also impacting children's play, is technology because it impacts how people see and interact with the world (Prensky, 2001; Edwards, 2005). Contemporary scholarship reveals that children are growing up as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) who are exposed to computers, smart phones, face books, smart boards and other technological devices and social media platforms from a very young age and are therefore "...highly technologically literate and engaged" (Bennett, 2011, p. 1). As confirmed by Nedovic and Morrissey (2013), "There are a range of reasons for the reduction of play, including children's increased involvement with new technology and increasing emphasis on avoiding risk on the part of parents and legislators" (Little & Wyver, 2008, as cited in Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013, p. 281).

In writing about play, several researchers point at the teachers' involvement in play as a controversial subject and thus, another challenge to the integration of play in educational settings given that the teacher plays a critical role in whether play is used as a tool in their classrooms (Fleer, 2013; Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Johnson, 2014; Lillemyr, 2009). This issue stems from the long-standing behaviorist idea that teachers should not interfere in children's play. "According to this view, the teacher's role was to set the stage for play and to observe children's play closely for clues about their emotional adjustment" affirm Van Hoorn, et al., (2015, p. 264). It was not until the 60's and 70's that a paradigm shift occurred about the teacher's role as a noninterventionist in children's play. According to Vanhoorn et al., (2015), it was the seminal work of Smilansky (1968) that served as a springboard for this paradigmatic shift. Researchers agree that during this same time the work of Vygotsky (1978) became

increasingly well-known and his ideas on the importance of scaffolding children's learning with the guidance of more knowledgeable peers or adults contributed to this change in thinking as well (Wood, 2014).

Thus, teachers' beliefs about play can impact whether they integrate play into the curriculum as part of their teaching and practice (Johnson, 2014; Saracho, 1988). As Vu et al., (2012) remind us, "While teachers may know that play is something that "should" be valued, without giving them a concrete foundation for understanding the value of play, it can be hard for them to transform their beliefs into classroom practices" (p. 215). Wood (2013) refers to this phenomenon as the "rhetoric-reality" problem where "...tensions between rhetoric and reality create one of the main challenges for practitioners and remains a theme in much research on play in early childhood settings" (p.15).

As the literature shows, the decline of play from early childhood settings is due to compound challenges brought forth by a rapidly changing global society (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Elkind, 2007a; Frost, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013). Joe Frost (2012) a well-recognized play scholar for more than forty years and an advocate of play declares, "The 'perfect storm' of events changing the culture of play is expansive and the causes, consequences, and solutions are complex" (p.121).

Despite the many obstacles to the inclusion of play in educational environments, play has been recognized nationally and globally, as central to children's growth and development. As such, this recognition needs to continue so that play can be utilized appropriately as a pedagogical tool (Almon & Miller, 2011) given that the reduction or removal of opportunities for play in educational settings can be disadvantageous to young children as future productive citizens (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Gill, 2007; Gray, 2013; Lester & Russell,

2010, 2014). Under such terms, in the sections that follow I briefly discuss some of the consequences of play deprivation.

Consequences of Play Deprivation

Research shows that there are dire consequences as a result of play deprivation (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006, 2013; Duarte & Cortez-Castro, 2015; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014b; Piers & Landau, 1980). For example on February, 2015, in a play conference organized by US Play Coalition with IPA/USA, in Clemson University, renowned psychologist Peter Gray, spoke about the decline of play and the rise of mental disorders. In his lecture, Gray spoke candidly about the rise in anxiety, depression, and sense of helplessness among children and adolescents and argued that these changes could be a possible consequence of the decline of play. In his lecture, Dr. Gray also spoke compellingly about the decline of empathy, creativity and the unfortunate rise in narcissism, as a result of more schooling and less time for free play.

To this point, I have argued that play has been recognized as valuable to children's development and learning in the field of early childhood education by diverse scholars, practitioners, and by both national and global organizations (Brooker et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2015). Also, I have suggested that several scholars (e.g., Frost, 2003, 2007, 2012; Gray, 2013; Elkind, 2007a) concur that the replacement of children's play for more didactic teaching arose from recent social changes in our fast paced society. Furthermore, I discussed the recent research suggesting that the decline of play could have serious consequences to children's learning and development (Gill, 2007; Gray, 2013, Gray, 2014b).

Statement of the Problem

Due to multiple and interrelated factors, children's play is being reduced or replaced by more didactic activities in early childhood education. In this light, in South City, Hispanic

teacher candidates have reportedly grappled with the challenges of making sense between the rhetoric and reality of the educational value of play. As a teacher educator, I observed this problem while preparing teacher candidates in a teacher education program in South City. Through lectures and diverse projects, teacher candidates in South City University, expressed that they often don't observe play as part of the early childhood classroom despite the national and global recognition that is given to play as a staple in children's learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). As research has shown (Van Hoorn et al., 2015; Reifel, 2011, 2014) observing children at play is an important part of making sense of how children learn through play.

Teacher candidates' beliefs and the potential role that these beliefs can have in their instructional practices as future professionals in the field of education are evident in the literature (Fives & Gill, 2015; Kagan, 1992; Pajares 1992; Richardson, 1996). However, too few studies in the United States have looked at teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play despite its central role in children's learning and development (Sherwood, 2009; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010, 2013). Consequently, the lack of scholarship in the area of teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play reveals a gap in the knowledge about play in the context of early childhood education (Sherwood, 2009).

An initial attempt to explore teacher candidates' beliefs about play in the United States was made by Sherwood and Riefel (2010), who found that participants ascribed a wide variety of definitions to play. Additionally, this study's findings suggested that play is a complex phenomenon that is not easily defined and that should be addressed in teacher education programs more thoroughly (p. 336). Sherwood and Reifel (2010) concluded their work by reminding us that, "The absence of a universal understanding of play makes incorporating it in to

a theoretically aligned teacher education program challenging” (p.335). Importantly, the results of Sherwood and Reifel’s (2010) study are also consistent with the issue of the ambiguity in defining play and how it serves as a medium for learning and development (Johnson et al., 2015; Lillemyer, 2009).

Furthermore, in a more recent study by the same researchers mentioned above, the findings revealed that although participants saw play as important for children paradoxically, preservice teachers believed that play was not necessary to children’s learning (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). This finding is consistent with the current curricular tensions concerning the educational value of play and its apparent decline in early childhood classrooms across the United States (Almon & Miller, 2011; Gray, 2013; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Singer et al., 2006; Wood, 2013, 2014). While some scholars, teachers and other stakeholders continue to question the usefulness of play for learning and development, the weight of evidence affirms its central role in children’s learning and development in every domain and its usefulness for eventual academic success (Bergen, 2009; Ashiabi, 2007, Frost et al., 2012). Given the centrality of play to children’s learning and development (Pellegrini, 2011), it is critical to investigate the value given to play from the perspective of future professionals, in particular, Hispanic teacher candidates who will soon make decisions about whether to integrate playful activities in their future classrooms (Caudle & Moran, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Jung & Jin, 2014).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this present study was to explore the beliefs of ten Hispanic teacher candidates about the value of play in children’s learning and development. Additionally, I sought to explore what possibly influenced the participants’ beliefs about the value of play, and also, my

purpose was to explore how these beliefs were conceivably shaped. More specifically the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play? Do they value play and if so, how and why?
2. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitutes play?
3. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development?
4. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play?
5. What influenced Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play? How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, this research is timely and necessary given that globally, play is recognized as a basic human right (Lester & Russell, 2010, 2014) and different scholars, practitioners, and organizations recognize it as “a medium for learning” and development (Bergen, 1998; Frost et al., 2012; Gray, 2013; Honig, 2006; Hughes, 2010). As evidenced by the numerous articles, organizations, books and other forms of discourse, play scholarship continues to be a topic of interest and is studied within different disciplines. Yet, in the 21st century, play in the United States continues to decline due to multiple factors (Almon & Miller, 2009; Brooker et al., 2014; Gray, 2014b). With this said, this study will likely contribute to the ongoing discourse about children's play (Johnson et al., 2015).

Secondly, although there continues to be an interest in studying play, this study is valuable because its focus is on teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play, which remains largely unexplored in the literature (Johnson et al., 2005; Sherwood & Reifel, 2013). Although contemporary scholarship reveals that several studies have investigated teacher candidates' attitudes, perspectives or conceptualization about play (e.g., Bulunuz, 2012; Cheng, 2001, 2012; Jung & Jin; 2014; Vera & Geneser, 2012) only two studies (e.g., Sherwood & Reifel, 2010, 2013) have specifically examined teacher candidates' beliefs about play.

A third reason, is that I found no studies that investigated Hispanic or Latino/a teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play. A study about Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play has the potential to enhance scholarship by focusing on the experiences and voices of participants who have not been represented in the literature (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). From this perspective, learning about different populations and their beliefs about play is important for future practice and research regarding the educational value of play in early childhood education (Johnson et al., 2015).

A fourth reason, is that although there are some studies that have examined teachers' beliefs about the role of the teacher in children's play, I found limited scholarship that examined teacher candidates' beliefs about the role of the teacher in children's play. Moreover, I found no studies that expressly studied Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the role of the teacher in children's play.

A fifth reason is that, although some studies have looked into factors that shape teachers beliefs (Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996) about teaching, more research needs to be conducted on what influences teacher candidates' beliefs, and more importantly, what might shape their beliefs about the value of children's play in relation to learning and development.

The sixth and final reason for this study's relevance is that it stands to inform teacher educators and researchers to possibly shape future teacher preparation programs given that there is a gap in the literature about how to prepare teacher candidates to learn about play as pedagogy (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). Revealing Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about play is a significant step towards efficiently addressing play in teacher education given that "...beliefs are the heart of teaching" (Vartulli, 2005, p. 82). As Frost et al., (2012) remind us, "...beliefs about play are an important foundation for the theories we choose and our education practices" (p.52).

From this point of view, gaining insight into teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development before they enter the field, is relevant to teacher educators (Sherwood & Reifel, 2013; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014; Vera & Geneser, 2012) given the current duality that exists in the educational environment between play, learning, and work (Almon & Miller, 2011). Essentially, teacher candidates' who "...will soon enter the educational field where child-initiated play-based curriculum, standards-based curriculum, and accountability issues frequently collide" face many of the potential challenges of meaningfully integrating play as pedagogy into classroom practices (Jung & Jin, 2014, p. 2). As Vera and Geneser (2012) remind us, "In order for teacher preparation programs to expand future teachers' knowledge on the importance of play, it is important to determine a baseline of student-knowledge about play" before they enter the field (p.1).

This investigation can be valuable for practitioners, scholars and other stakeholders in the field of early childhood education who believe in the value of play to children's learning and development and advocate for the need to keep play as pedagogy in the early childhood classrooms. Additionally, this study could be beneficial to practitioners and teacher educators who do not believe that play has value in early childhood settings and might hopefully reconsider

the importance they give to teaching teacher candidate's about the value of children's play as part of their course objectives and course requirements.

Definitions of Terms

Early Childhood Education: According to Bredekamp & Copple (1997), early childhood education refers to "...any group program in a center, school, or other facility that serves birth through age 8" (p. 3).

Play: The literature reveals that play is difficult to define and thus there are many definitions of play. Drawing on the seminal work of Huizinga (1955) and Rubin, Fein, & Vanderberg, (1983) Sluss (2015) proposes that the following are essential elements of play that have been well accepted by most play scholars:

- (a) pleasurable, (b) voluntary or freely chosen, (c) non literal or symbolic,
- (d) requires active engagement, (e) free of external rules, (f) focuses on the means rather than the end results or outcomes (pp.10-11).

Hispanic: In a 2011 report based on data collected from the 2010 census on race and Hispanic origin by Humes, Jones and Ramirez (2011) "Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States (United Census Bureau, 2011, p. 2). The context where this study took place is a Hispanic serving university and evidence collected during this interview (Demographic Sheet) suggests that students identified themselves as Hispanic.

Belief: A person's strongly held opinion based on episodic memory with material drawn from experience or cultural sources (Nespor, 1987).

Teacher Candidate: The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) refers to candidates as, “Individuals admitted to, or enrolled in, programs for the initial or advanced preparation of teachers, teachers continuing their professional development, or other school professionals. Candidates are distinguished from *students* in P–12 schools” (NCATE, 2010-2014).

Push-down Academics: Push-down academics occur when the curricular expectations of older grade levels are brought down to younger children.

Rio Grande Valley: The four counties that comprise the southernmost tip of Texas that includes: Cameron, Willacy, Starr and Hidalgo.

United States/Mexico Border Region: The United States-México border region is defined as the area of land being 100 kilometers (62.5 miles) north and south of the international boundary (La Paz Agreement). It stretches approximately 2000 miles from the southern tip of Texas to California (United States-Mexico Border Health Commission).

Service Learning: The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) refers to service learning as “A teaching/learning method that integrates community service into academic courses, using structured reflective thinking to enhance learning of course content. Through meaningful service, candidates are engaged in problem solving to create improved schools and communities while developing their academic skills, their sense of civic responsibility, and their understanding of social problems affecting children and families. When used as a pedagogical strategy, service learning can help candidates understand the culture, community, and families of students, as well as the connections between the school and the community” (NCATE, 2010-2014).

Play Day: A play day celebrates a child's right to play while advocating children's rights.

Children's right to play, is recognized as a human right by Article 31 of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study with constructivist grounded theory methods is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the study's purpose, the problem statement, a brief review of the literature that supports the problem statement, the research questions and the definitions of significant terms for the study. Chapter two presents a review of the literature which focuses on three major areas of play, mainly: The value of play in early childhood education, Teachers' role in children's play, and Teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play. Next, chapter three presents the rationale for the methodology of the study and the procedures taken for collecting and analyzing data in line with its qualitative nature. This chapter also gives detailed information about the context and the participants of this study. Chapter four presents the findings of the study focusing on ten Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play. Importantly, chapter four also presents a theoretical interpretation of what possibly influenced teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play. Finally, in chapter five a summary of the study is provided, along with the study's major findings. This discussion is followed with the conclusions, the implications, the limitations and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The relevant literature that informed this study is presented in this chapter. This review of the literature is organized into the following main topics in order to contextualize and frame this research study: *Value of play in early childhood education*, *Teachers' role in children's play*, and *Teacher candidates' beliefs about play*. In the first section, *Value of play in early childhood education*, I provide a brief overview of the history of play and the key scholarship that provides the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings for how play is seen within the early childhood context. Within this same section, I discuss *The multiple definitions of play*, *Theories of play*, *The benefits of play for children* and finally, I discuss *The decline of play*. In the second major section of this chapter, I explore literature on *Teachers' role in play*. Specifically, I discuss relevant scholarship on the role that teachers have played in children's play in early childhood settings. Additionally, I explore studies on early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices of play. The final section of this chapter discusses the literature found on *Teacher candidates' beliefs about play*.

Value of Play in Early Childhood Education

Historical Overview

A literature review of the full history of play is beyond the scope of this study. However, the foci of this research would be incomplete without a brief historical examination of the work of early childhood scholarship that laid the foundation for how children's play is viewed within

the context of early childhood education in the 21st century. As a contextual backdrop, the study of play has a very long history given that people and children have always played (Barnes, 2006; Chudacoff, 2011; Cohen, 2006). As Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) remind us “From Plato to Kant, from Froebel to Piaget, philosophers, historians, biologists, psychologists, and educators have studied this ubiquitous behavior to understand how and why we play” (p.1). Given the significance of play as a necessary human activity for mental, social and physical health (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Wilson, 1975), it is necessary to explore historical philosophers, educators and scholars and reflect on how their beliefs have shaped the value that is given to play in early childhood education.

According to Frost (2010), “Records of children’s play date back to antiquity, even earlier than classical Athens and Greece” (p. 9). From the beginning of history, children have played with diverse types of toys, games, animals and natural objects (Barnes, 2006; Chudacoff, 2011). Present day scholarship reveals that museums are filled with dolls, games, balls, and other types of play artifacts that prove that children have played for many centuries (Frost et al., 2012). Therefore, given that the history of children’s play is dense and complex, this review will begin by retracing the role of play in history from the time that the ideas of looking at early childhood as a distinct stage of life began to surface (Chudacoff, 2011; Follari, 2015, Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Platz & Arellano, 2011).

As early as the 1600s, there were advocates who were beginning to focus their attention on early childhood as a different stage of life. This information is noteworthy, given that prior to this time, “...little thought was given to the development and education of children, especially the very young” (Platz & Arellano, 2011, p. 55; Hughes, 2010). Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670) was a Czech educator and author who produced one of the first textbooks that advocated

for a different approach to educating children. Two of his famous books were *The Great Didactic* and *Oribis Pictus* (The world of Pictures). The latter, became the first picture book for children and also a model for future educational books (Platz & Arellano, 2011). Significantly, Comenius advocated for parents as children's first and most important teachers. Additionally, as affirmed by Follari (2015), Comenius recommended that, "...mothers individualize instruction because children develop at different rates and he warned against excessive academics too early" (p.33). Furthermore, Morrison (2011) notes, "Comenius also thought that sensory education forms the basis for all learning that insofar as possible, everything should be taught through the senses" (p. 60). Importantly, this approach to education "...forms the basis for much of early childhood practice today" concludes Morrison (2011, p. 60).

In terms of his specific contribution to play, Comenius believed that children could learn through play. According to Platz and Arellano (2011), Comenius considered that children needed to learn to be a part of society and that play served as a medium for them to practice societal roles and expectations. As Platz and Arellano (2011) remind us, "Through play, Comenius believed children learn social skills and begin to inquire and investigate ideas they have" (p. 59). In sum, "Comenius saw nature as a prime method of fostering children's growth and advocated letting children play and grow in natural, harmonious, settings"(Follari, 2015, p. 33).

About forty years later when thinkers began "...to reconsider the human mind" (Frost et al., 2010, p. 6) John Lock's (1632-1704) theory of mind as a blank tablet, or *tabula rasa* (Henson, 2003) emerged. According to Morrison (2011), "By this, Locke meant that environment and experience literally form the mind" (p. 60). For Platz and Arrellano (2011),

Locke, "...promoted the idea that the newborn child had an empty slate in terms of their nature and potential to learn" (p. 56).

The literature brings to light that Locke's view of education consisted of several elements. In regard to this issue, Frost (2010) writes, "Locke's aims for education revolved around several themes: virtue derived from proper religious training, wisdom in practical matters, breeding for good manner in accordance with English standards, and learning or knowledge based on practical judgment" (p. 21). Additionally, Morrison (2011) notes, "According to Locke development comes from the stimulation children receive from parents and caregivers and through experiences they have in their environment" (p. 60). Importantly, Locke wrote a book titled, "*How to Bring up Your Children*" in England. In this book, Locke explained that young children should have "...playthings or toys of different sorts, but should be allowed to play with only one at a time" in order to "prevent spoiling the child" (Frost, 2010, p. 21). Further, Platz & Arellano (2011) declare that Locke "...echoed the importance of play for curriculum development and suggested that children begin to learn to read when they learn to speak" (p. 59). In terms of play and gender, Locke did differentiate play based on the sex of children. As affirmed by Roopnarine and Johnson (2013), "He did believe that girls' education should differ from that of boys by restricting their outdoor play, including the services of a 'dancing master,' and by avoiding harsh discipline" (p. 8).

Furthermore, it is important to note that Locke was not only a British philosopher but that he was also a doctor who looked at children through an additional and distinct lens (Hughes, 2010). "Locke's training in medicine was a probable cause for his interest in the child's health," affirms Frost (2010, p. 22). As such, Locke believed that children needed to be both physically and mentally healthy (Frost, 2010). One of Locke's greatest influences was that he paved the

way for experiential education. As Henson (2003) asserts, “Locke’s experience based on educational philosophy gave birth to a concept called *experiential education*” (p. 7).

While play is not often linked with Locke, researchers like Roopnarine and Johnson (2013) and Frost et al., (2012) proclaim that he did value play. In fact, According to Platz & Arellano (2011), “In his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Lock supports Comenius’s notion that play is a critical method to learning for young children”(p. 57). From this point of view, Locke saw play as a necessary part of childhood where children could “...learn from their exploration and play” (Platz & Arellano, 2011, p. 57). Moreover, Frost et al., (2012) write that for Locke play, “Although not good for the mind per se, play did have a role in improving attitude, aptitude, and physical well-being” (p. 7). To close this part, Follari (2015) reminds us that, “The beliefs of Comenius and Locke did much to counter the negative view of children that generally pervaded the 17th century” (p. 33). In spite of their contribution, Frost et al., (2012) unveil that, “Philosophical beliefs evolved during this era, but they fell short of articulating or describing the actual play of children” (p. 8).

French Philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-72), “...was a giant among philosophers” asserts Frost (2010) and his philosophy on children, including the importance of children’s play have informed the beliefs about play in early childhood for centuries (p. 22). Moreover, Rousseau is best remembered for being one of the biggest advocates for early childhood and at the same time, “...was one of history’s greatest contradictions” (Henson, 2003, p. 7). For example, Henson (2003) reminds us that, “With the birth of his own children, he gave away each child; yet, perhaps no one else has ever done so much to help children” (p. 7).

Rousseau is best remembered in history for his book *Emile* (Cohen, 2006). According to Frost (2010), “In his classic *Emile*, Rousseau (2001) made his case for play, leisure, and the

development of strong, healthy bodies” (p. 23). Frost (2010) further adds, “He rejected the common perception of adults that play was essentially doing nothing, and favored children’s natural running, jumping and engaging in festivals, games, singing, and amusements” (p. 23). Furthermore, Frost (2010) highlights that, “For Rousseau, work and play were all one to the child, his games are his work and he does not know the difference” (p. 24).

It is important to mention the fact that “Rousseau did not believe that mothers were capable of properly educating their children” (Follari, 2015, p. 34). According to Beatty (1995) Rousseau proposed that mothers should allow for male tutors to educate their young children. Follari (2015) also calls attention to how beliefs change by stating, “Here we see that first major pendulum swing relating to parents’ role in young children’s education” (p. 34). Rousseau, much like Locke, differentiated education based on gender. Roopnarine and Johnson (2013) comment that Rousseau “...had extremely conservative views on the education of girls, believing that their education should be planned as a preparation for marriage” (p. 90). In sum, Rousseau viewed education as a natural occurrence where the teacher takes the form of a “guide or facilitator” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 13).

Known as a one of the great educational reformers (Hughes, 2010), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss educator who was influenced by both Comenius and Rousseau brought another shift in perspective to the literature (Morrison, 2011). According to Henson (2003), Pestalozzi opened a school in Burgdorf with a curriculum geared towards teaching children according to their abilities with a learner-centered curriculum and “...was successful in changing many long-standing educational views and practices” (p. 24). Pestalozzi organized a school in Burgdorf for 4- to 8- year- olds according to the children’s abilities. According to Frost (2010), “He deplored and initiated reform in three particular practices: the exclusion of children

of the poor from schooling, rote learning, and cruel punishment” (p.24). In addition, “Pestalozzi believed that the *whole* child should be educated (physically, mentally, and emotionally), and that children should be *nourished* like a plant while they *learned by doing*” adds Henson (2003, p. 8). Frost (2010) also reminds us that, “He originated the concept of readiness, and substituted time and experience for rote learning” (p. 24). Furthermore, Locke believed that teachers should respect children and “base their discipline on love” (Henson, 2003, p. 7). Importantly, Locke, in his seminal book, *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801) “... described the methods for his ideal teacher as more playful and practical than didactic,” affirms Frost (2010, p. 25). Moreover, on the role of the mother and her role in education, Follari (2011) wrote, “Unlike Rousseau, Pestalozzi validated the mother and home as the most natural learning environment and held a low opinion of schools for young children” (p. 28).

Known as the father of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) is credited by many scholars for opening the first kindergarten in 1837 in Blankenburg, Germany, and as a significant pioneer in the field of early childhood (Hughes, 2010; Platz & Arellano, 2006; Tovey, 2013). According to Tovey (2013), Froebel grappled with finding the right name for his school. In reference to how kindergarten obtained its name, Tovey (2013) states, “The word captured Froebel’s vision of a place which was in tune with the natural development of children, where they could grow and develop in harmony with nature, a place which cultivated the unique capacities of each individual as part of a community of learners” (p. 11).

However, the literature shows that Froebel was criticized in his own country for his radical ideas on how children should be educated, and after his death, his curricular ideas on teaching were brought to the United States “...where they became extremely popular” for several reasons (Frost et al., 2012, p. 11). As Frost (2010) reminds us, “Arguably, his work was more

influential in promoting play and natural play environments for school children than that of any other historical figure” (p. 26). The literature reveals that Froebel referred to play as “...the highest form of child development” (1887, p. 54). Frost (2010) further explains that, “His vehicle of instruction was play, which was to be instructive and enjoyable, unlike the rigid instruction and dull, passive tasks prevalent in his day” (p. 29). Like Frost, Tovey (2013) concurs with this idea and states, “This was at a time when there was almost no provision for young children” (p. 1). Morrison (2011) proclaims that, “To promote self-activity, Froebel developed a systematic, planned curriculum for the education of children based on gifts, occupations, songs, educational games” (p. 62). Platz & Arellano (2006) agree with this notion and state, “He used play as a teaching strategy and created appropriate games and songs to enhance children’s interaction with one another” (p. 58). As stated by Frost (2010), “Froebel’s curriculum was based upon the child’s inner unfolding much as a young plant unfolds, requiring tender care and nourishment rather than force and restraint” (p. 28).

Regarding teachers, Froebel (1887) believed that “...the teachers role is to observe children’s natural unfolding and to provide activities that enable them to learn what they are ready to learn when they are ready to learn it” (Morrison, 2011, p. 62). Significantly, Froebel also valued the role of women as teachers of his kindergarten because of their innate nurturing tendencies. One of Froebel’s important contributions was his belief in the value of noncompetitive outdoor activities that included play. Moore et al., (2012) concur and extend this idea by stating that, “Froebel’s emphasis on noncompetitive play in an outdoor setting in an important precursor to the modern play movement” (p. 43). In essence, this belief led to the organization of the first play day documented in history which Froebel referred to as a *playfest*, where children could play freely in an outdoor setting (Moore et al., 2012). While Froebel’s

(1887) educational ideas on play were not based on empirical systematic data, they have certainly paved the way for other early childhood scholars who have established their scholarship on his philosophical underpinnings that suggest that play is significant to children's learning and development (Tovey, 2013). Further, Frost et al., (2012) assert, "With Froebel, we see a shift from mere thought about practice and play to specific prescriptions about what practice should be" (p. 11). In talking about play, Frost et al., (2012) further remind us that, "He began with the world of play ideas and translated the ideas into activities, and he prescribed what play should be for it to serve the ends of education"(p. 11). As a final point, Froebel contributed significantly to what we know today about children's play in the 21st century. As such, he continues to be known as the "father of kindergarten" and founding father of early childhood education that created a play-based curriculum and his ideas about play remain as a valuable resource in early childhood education (Frost, 2010; Platz & Arellano, 2011).

As it has been discussed in detail, the phenomenon of play has a long history given that children have always played (Chudacoff, 2011). According to Wood (2013) "The pioneer educators established the concept of childhood as a distinct stage in human development, and emphasized children's natural affinity for play" (p. 2). Wood (2013), as well other scholars, (e.g., Frost, 2012; Frost et al., 2012; Tovey, 2013) also note, that these founding scholars did not exhibit consistent accord in their philosophical principles or practices. In essence, from an early childhood education viewpoint, the literature reveals that the value given to young children and to their play has been influenced by a pattern of pendulum swings based in part on the underlying beliefs of influential people in society, and what they believe is worth knowing (Frost et al., 2012).

Multiple Definitions of Play

For centuries the phenomenon of play has been difficult to define and the literature reveals that numerous scholars from different disciplines have proposed diverse definitions (Ailwood, 2003; Burghardt, 2011; Howard, 2002; Johnson et al., 2015; Lillemyer, 2009; Smith & Vollstedt, 1985). In fact, according to Howard (2002) recent scholarship also reveals "...much of the literature surrounding play has been devoted to its definition" (p. 489). "Like many innate human processes, play is hard to pin down because it is so varied, flexible and individual to the player(s)," asserts Moyles (2010, p. 23). In the following sections, I briefly discuss several definitions of play to show the complexity in defining this phenomenon.

To examine some of the definitions of play, I begin by considering Sluss's (2015) assertion that, "One of the first definitions of play was provided by the founder of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel" (p. 9). Importantly, as previously mentioned, Froebel (1887) believed that, "Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul" (p. 57). In talking about play, Froebel (1887), also explained it in the following way:

"Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical human life as a whole- of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the source of all that is good...Play at this time is of deep significance...the germinal leaves of the later life" (p. 55).

From the moment in time when Froebel's definition surfaced, many other scholars have also attempted to define play (Johnson et al., 2015). As noted by Frost (2010), "Throughout the twentieth century scholars unsuccessfully wrestled with the formation of a clear definition of

play, but to date none is clear or unequivocal” (p. xvii). Additionally, Frost (2010) points out that, “Across the century proposed definitions reflected the academic roles of the developers, primarily behavior scientists, resulting in a “crazy quilt’ of theories about its meaning and purposes” (p. xvii).

While philosopher John Dewey is not often synonymous with play, the literature shows that he includes the concept of “playfulness” in his work (1910). In what follows, Dewey (1910) writes about being playful:

“To be playful and serious as the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition. Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic. To give the mind this free play is not to encourage toying with a subject, but is to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from its subservience to a preconceived belief or habitual aim. Mental play is open-mindedness, faith in the power of thought to preserve its own integrity without external supports and arbitrary restrictions. Hence free mental play involves seriousness, the earnest following of the development of subject matter. It is incompatible with carelessness or flippancy, for it exacts accurate noting of every result reached in order that every conclusion may be put to further use” (p. 219).

From this perspective, Dewey (1910) sees playfulness as a serious process in which the child is allowed to engage in creative thinking and active participation while playing.

In the middle of the 20th century, Johan Huizinga’s (1955) seminal work, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play-Element in Culture*, proposed that “...play has been viewed as the cause of

almost every human achievement and the very foundation on which human culture rests” (Smith & Vollstedt, 1985, p. 1042). Huizinga identified five characteristics that play must have:

1. Play is free, is in fact freedom
2. Play is not “ordinary” or “real” life
3. Play is distinct from “ordinary” life both as to locality and duration
4. Play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme
5. Play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it (pp. 8-13).

As I explained in the previous chapter, Sluss (2015) reminds us that, “The basis for the most respected and used definition of play was based on the work of John Huizinga (1955) and further developed by Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983)” (p. 10). Ruben et al., (1983) offer the following criteria for play:

1. Play is personally motivated by the satisfaction embedded in the activity and not governed either by basic needs and drives, or by social demands.
2. Players are concerned with activities more than with goals. Goals are self-imposed and the behavior of the players is spontaneous.
3. Play occurs with familiar objects, or following the exploration of unfamiliar objects. Children supply their own meaning to play activities and control the activity themselves.
4. Play activities can be nonliteral.
5. Play is free from the rules imposed from the outside and the rules that do exist can be modified by the players.
6. Play requires the active engagement of the players.

To examine play, Krasnor and Pepler (1980) suggest four criteria to identify a play activity as follows: flexibility, positive effect, intrinsic motivation, and nonliterality (Russ, 2004). According to Russ (2004), “They believed that “... pure play involves all four components, to varying degree” (p. 2).

Interestingly, Smith and Vollstedt’s (1985) work was the first of its kind to attempt to empirically investigate what criteria others have used in defining play (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Through their study, according to Saracho and Spodek (1998), Smith and Vollstedt (1985) found that “Apparently, play is joyful, flexible, and imaginative” (p. 4).

For Doris Bergen (1988) play is a “medium” for development and learning. In (1988) the author wrote:

“All human beings are active seekers of knowledge, and play is an integral facet of this ongoing quest. The pedagogical value of play does not lie in its use as a way to teach children a specific set of skills through structured activities called ‘play.’ Rather, play is valuable for children primarily because it is a medium for development and learning” (p. 67).

In talking about a definition of play, in the article “*What’s new in play research?*” Fromberg (1997) proposed that, “Play is symbolic (acting “as if” or “what if”), meaningful, active, pleasurable even when serious, voluntary and intrinsically motivated, rule-governed (implicitly or explicitly), and episodic (shifting spontaneously and flexibly)(p. 1).

In that same decade, Lifter and Bloom (1998) proposed their definition for play and describe it in the following way:

“Play is the expression of intentional states—the representations in consciousness constructed from what children know about and are learning from ongoing

events—and consists of spontaneous, naturally occurring activities with objects that engage attention and interest. Play may or may not involve caregivers or peers, may or may not involve a display of affect, and may or may not involve pretense” (p. 164).

In her article, *The Vital Role of Play in Childhood*, Joan Almon, who is known as a play advocate for children and one of the founders for Alliance for Childhood, defines play as “...the bubbling spring of health and creativity within each child—and for that matter, within every human being”(Almon, 2004, p. 1).

Drawing from his earlier research (e.g, Burghardt, 1999, 2005) Burghardt (2011), presented the following criteria as essential in play:

“Play [1] is incompletely functional in the context, in which it appears; [2] is spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding, or voluntary; [3] differs from other more serious behaviors in form (e.g., exaggerated) or timing (occurring early in life before the more serious version is needed); [4] is repeated, but not in abnormal and unvarying stereotypic form (e.g., distressed rocking, pacing); and [5] is initiated in the absence of acute or chronic stress” (p. 17).

Another contribution to play scholarship on defining play is Peter Gray’s (2013) definition. For Gray (2013) play can be defined as: self-chosen and self-directed, play is motivated by means more than ends, play is guided by mental rules, play is imaginative, and play is conducted in alert, active but non–stressed frame of mind.

Based on the review of the literature, the multiple definitions of play indicate that play is complex, multi-faceted and context-dependent and that no single definition can explain the role of play in children’s learning and development (Wood, 2013). On the basis of this review, the

literature reveals that many scholars from different standpoints have tried to conceptualize and capture what play is without successfully agreeing on a universal definition of play (Burghardt, 2011; Lieberman, 1977). While the literature shows that many complex definitions of play exist, a concrete or universal definition continues to be missing from the literature (Burghardt, 2011).

Theories of Play

For decades different researchers have proposed various theories as lenses to understand the phenomenon of play (Johnson et al., 2015; Wood, 2013).

In this regard, Frost et al., (2012) reminds us, “We need theory as a tool to help us think about what we mean when we talk about play, especially when we make assertions about how important play is or claim that play is allowing us to meet education or developmental purposes (p. 29). In what follows, I discuss several important thinkers of play and their theoretical contributions to the field.

The theoretical underpinnings of play evolved during the 18th and 19th centuries through what today are known as classical theories of play “...to explain why children play” (Fleer, 2013, p. 103). According to Johnson et al., (2005) “these theories can be characterized as armchair theories that rely on philosophical reflections and reasoning rather than on experimental research” (p. 33).

For example, According to Fleer (2013), Herbert Spencer’s (1873) surplus energy theory of play proposed that play is a product of excess energy left over after all other basic needs have been met. From this perspective, Cohen (2006) further notes, that Spencer (1873) believed that children “...learned how to master several skills in play” and that “play was a phase” (p. 26). While the relaxation theory of play by Lazarus (1824–1903) took an opposing view, rather than

seen as using surplus energy, play was an activity that occurred after work in order to relax and build up further energy (Curtis, 1916).

During the 20th century diverse modern theories of play surfaced in the United States. It is Jean Piaget's work in particular, that brought a major paradigm shift in play scholarship and research in the 1960's (Saracho, 2012). Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, was a prolific researcher who studied cognition amongst other subjects. Interestingly, most of his initial studies were conducted with his own three children (Wood, 2013). One of Piaget's greatest contributions to the field of early childhood education is that he scientifically proved that children's cognitive skills differ greatly from adults (Follari, 2015; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). In order to prove his hypothesis, Piaget proposed a theory of cognitive development with four hierarchical developmental stages (Piaget 1947/2003). Piaget believed that children develop cognitive abilities as they adapt to the experiences that are afforded to them by their environment (Piaget, 1963). In order to adapt, children engage in the process of assimilation and accommodation as they try to re-organize new schemas. For Piaget, play is necessary for children's cognitive development and learning (Frost et al., 2012). In essence, play serves as a function of these cognitive processes and allows children to make sense of new experiences and concepts that are presented to them through their daily interactions with their "...ecological resources" (Morgante, 2013, p. 115). Moreover, according to Piaget, there are three types of play: sensory motor play, symbolic play, and games with rules (Morgante, 2013). Importantly, this type of play parallels the hierarchical stages of development within his cognitive theory (Frost et al., 2012). Fundamentally, through his studies, Piaget discovered that as children's mental structures evolve, their play becomes more sophisticated and complex (Piaget, 1947/2003). From this point of view, each play stage affords young children an opportunity to experience disequilibrium and to seek

equilibrium in order to learn new concepts and advance to more intricate play possibilities (Piaget, 1945/1962). Morgante (2013) succinctly concurs with this notion by stating that “From a Piagetian perspective (1945/1962), children’s engagement in higher order, cognitive play forms is advantageous for knowledge acquisition” (p. 116).

According to Smolucha & Smolucha (1998) Piaget first introduced his play theory in his book *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923/1973). Then, Piaget expanded his theory on play in his seminal work, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (Piaget, 1951/1962). In this light, Piaget’s (1923/1973; 1951/1962) theoretical underpinnings have served as a research foundation for other researchers and educators to argue that play has a central role in children’s cognitive development (Frost et al., 2012; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). Although Piaget is acknowledged for his groundbreaking work on children’s play, his ideas have also been criticized for proposing that children cannot progress beyond the stage within which they are operating from cognitively (Fleer, 2013). Because Piaget believed that children actively construct knowledge on their own, another criticism of his work is that he analyzed individual cognitive development when many have argued that play occurs within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson et al., 2005). According to several play scholars (Frost et al., 2012) Piaget regards early pretend play as a solitary activity, which served only to organize schema that the child already possessed (Bergen, 1998). Despite criticism, Piaget’s work continues to provide a valid framework for understanding the role of play in children’s cognitive development and learning (Van Hoorn et al, 2015). Unquestionably, Piaget’s work is found throughout the literature in the form of research studies often supporting his work and in this present era, his theories remain part of the discourse in early childhood education (Fleer, 2013; Wood, 2013; Frost et al., 2012).

Another classical theorist who radically contributed to play scholarship was a Russian psychologist by the name of Lev Vygotsky. According to Bodrova and Leong (2005) after Vygotsky's untimely death at 37 from tuberculosis, his colleagues and students continued to elaborate and advance on much of his unpublished work. More significantly, they expanded on the development of practical applications of these principles to early childhood theory, play scholarship and practice (Bodrova & Leong, 2005, p. 441). According to Johnson et al., (2005), Vygotsky "...believed that play has several roles in cognitive development" (p. 41). "At the most basic level, Vygotsky believed that make-believe play has a key role in abstract thought, enabling children to think about meanings independently of the object they represent" (Johnson et al., p. 41). Johnson et al., (2005), further note, "On a second level play can provide a context for socially assisted learning" (p. 41). In contrast to Piaget (1951/1962), Vygotsky (1978) believed that children's cognitive development is influenced by culture and social interchange with more knowledgeable peers within a particular context such as the home, classroom or playground. In addition, Vygotsky (1978) believed that a more knowledgeable peer could transmit necessary social values as well as other information to young children through a process of assistance or "scaffolding" in order to enhance the mental abilities that the child could otherwise not produce on his/her own (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Johnson et al., (2005) add, "Vygotsky distinguished between two levels of development: actual development, the level at which the child can perform on his/her own, and the potential development, the level at which the child can perform with help from others" (p. 41).

Vygotsky's (1978) most recognized contribution to field of education is the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as the distance between what the child can do on his own and what he/she can do through the "scaffolding" or assistance from more

advanced peers or teachers (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Significantly, Vygotsky (1978) wrote the following in regards to the Zone of Proximal development:

“What we call the Zone of Proximal Development... is a distance between the actual developmental level determined by individual problem solving and the level of development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

From this point of view, children’s learning opportunities are enhanced by the support of more experienced peers or teachers who intentionally draw on the children’s prior social and cultural knowledge to assist them in reorganizing and extending their comprehension of a particular concept. Play allows young children to weave familiar facts together to build new configurations. As previously noted, from a Vygotskian (1978) viewpoint, familiar facts are elevated by the help of a more knowledgeable and intentional person. Further, play provides a non-threatening environment for the child and at the same time, it serves as a demonstration for the teacher about what children know and what they need to know. In essence, play allows teachers to scaffold children’s learning. As Johnson et al., (2005) assert, “Play is the natural context in which this type of scaffolding can occur” (p. 41). In reference to play’s role in relation to the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky (1978) writes:

“In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play he is, as if it were, a head above himself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level. The relationship of play to development should be compared to the relationship between

instruction and development. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development” (p. 74).

For Vygotsky (1978), because play is a natural process for children, they are able to enter an unexplored zone of knowledge or experience where they usually feel secure enough to test hypothesis about the comprehension of certain ideas without fear. Because children use their senses to play with objects, ideas and people in multiple ways; play serves as central element in creating zones of proximal development to facilitate children’s learning and development.

As noted earlier, the literature reveals that since the 19th century, relevant theories of play have been proposed in order to better conceptualize children’s play in relation to learning and development. However, no single theory has been able to completely capture how play impacts children’s development and educational growth. Although this literature review does not include every theory about play, it does offer a brief look into some of the most influential theories about play that have served as a foundation for further theories and research about play.

Benefits of Play for Children

As discussed in chapter one, the recurring theme in the literature on the benefits of play for children is that it appears to influence a wide range of areas of development in an interrelated and holistic manner (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Frost et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2015; Pellegrini, 2011). In what follows, I continue with the examination of some of the relevant research on the benefits of play for children.

As a point of departure, in recent years, researchers have been on the quest to investigate how play experiences may enhance neurological connection in brain development (Frost et al., 2012; Gray, 2013; Johnson et al., 2005). In fact, Johnson et al., (2005) state, “...Play experiences mediate this brain development, as can other high-quality experiences, first by helping with the

creation of the enormous number of synapses that are formed in the first three years and then by helping with the formation of these more complex neuronal structures that are created over the childhood years” (p. 130). Some researchers like Brown and Vaughan (2009) believe that play shapes the brain. In reference to this point these authors explain that:

“Neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, social scientists, and researchers from every point of the scientific compass now know that play is a profound biological process. It has evolved over eons in many animal species to promote survival. It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation” (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, p. 5).

A topic of interest in the literature appears to be pretend play or fantasy play and its relationship to different areas of development (Lillard et al., 2013). For example, based on the theoretical underpinnings of Vygotsky’s (1978) seminal work, the research conducted by Bodrova and Leong (2003) offers clear evidence for the importance of pretend play to children’s learning in the area of literacy. In particular, the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum proposes the use of socio dramatic play to foster literacy (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Bodrova and Leong (2003) found that “mature play” as opposed to “immature play” has positive effects for literacy skills, language and social skills. In addition, Bodrova and Leong (2003) consider that children’s mature play can be observed in children who have developed the following features: imaginary situations, multiple roles, clearly defined rules, flexible themes, language development and length of play (p. 51).

In (2006) Honig, Professor Emeriti of child development wrote about the benefits of playing for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Hoing (2006) describes twelve benefits that young children gain from play: (1) Play enhances bodily gracefulness; (2) Play promotes social skills; (3) Play sharpens cognitive and language skills; (4) Play teaches gender roles; (5) Play develops understanding of number and time concepts; (6) Play promotes spatial understanding; (7) Play prompts causality reasoning; (8) Sociodramatic play clarifies the world of pretend versus real; (9) Play enriches sensory and aesthetic appreciation; (10) Play extends attention span, persistence, and sense of mastery; (11) Children express emotions through play; and (12) Play deepens a child's sense of serenity and joy. Seen in this light, the benefits of play for infants, toddlers and preschooler are many as proposed by Honig (2006).

In a recent study, Reynolds, Stagnitti, and Kidd (2011) conducted a quantitative study that utilized a quasi-experimental design to collect and analyze data. The aim of the Reynolds et al., (2011), study was to "...explore whether a play-based curriculum was an appropriate learning environment for children with a low socio-economic status, compared to a traditionally structured classroom environment" (p. 121). Another relevant purpose of the study was to examine changes in play, language and social skills, over a six-month period (Reynolds et al., 2011). The study was conducted in Victoria, Australia and the participants were four six-year old children and two female teachers. The researchers state that, "...the study involved pre-and post-testing over a six-month period" (Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 123). Additionally, Reynolds et al., (2011) state that there were several instruments used to measure the data collected for this study, specifically, the instruments utilized were, ChIPPA, SAOLA and PIPPS (p.123). The results of this study are that children at the play-based curriculum school made significant gains in all areas assessed (Reynolds et al., 2011, p. 123).

To this point, I have argued that the literature reviewed shows that there are benefits to children's play. In essence, the literature shows that play promotes learning across all developmental domains: cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language and literacy.

The Disappearance of Play

From the time of Froebel's introduction to the kindergarten, and the first play-based curriculum, the field of early childhood education has undergone major changes (Frost, 2010). Although the literature reveals that children's play is linked to academic and social success, its role as a developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood settings appears to be at risk (Almon, 2003, 2004; Almon & Miller, 2011). The literature confirms that for over three decades the belief that play is the opposite of learning and that time spent playing detracts from academics, have been topics of great debate amongst scholars, educators, and other stakeholders (Barlett, 2011; Fisher, et al., 2008; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Zigler, et al., 2004; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). According to Hirsh-Pasek et al., (2009) there are two reasons for the push-down curriculum in preschools. First, there is a social misunderstanding of what is essentially necessary for children to succeed academically in school. According to Hirsh-Pasek et al., (2009) recent brain research on the significance of the first years of life to children building necessary connections has generated a misunderstanding as to what actually enhances brain connectivity. Because of the recent explosion on brain research, the market place has taken advantage of these claims and has bombarded parents with all types of toys and gadgets that promise to increase brain capacity (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Second, didactic instruction has increased dramatically in schools "...in response to the fact that children from underprivileged environments are less ready for the transition to school than are their middle-class peers" (Hirsh-Pasek, 2009, pp. 6-7). Consequently, in an effort to

close the achievement gap, government initiatives such as the No Child Left behind Act of 2001 and recently Common Core Standards were created to reduce the achievement gap in the United States to provide equal opportunities for all children to reach their full academic potential (Almon & Miller, 2011; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). As noted by Almon and Miller (2011), “The pushing down of the elementary curriculum into early childhood has reached a new peak with the adoption of almost every state of the so called common core standards” (p. 1). In response to the apparent loss of play from early childhood environments, several advocates of play have voiced their concerns regarding the exclusion or elimination of play from the classroom through different veins that include the dissemination of their individual and collective scholarship (Barlett, 2011). In the paragraphs that follow some pertinent literature about the apparent loss of children’s play is reviewed.

In 1987, Irving Sigel wrote about “hothousing” in the article *Does Hothousing Rob Children of their childhood?* In the article Sigel stated, “By hothousing I mean the process of inducing infants to acquire knowledge that is typically acquired at a later developmental level” (p. 212). Moreover, Siegel warns against the use of rote learning for math, reading and other subjects and its effects on development. Thus, proponents of ‘hot housing’ consider that all children can learn with appropriately structured and prescribed environments filled with fabricated close-ended materials. Some researchers propose that emphasis on academic, didactic and measureable educational outcomes, such as the ones Sigel warned about in the late 80’s, has led to a reduction or exclusion of play from the early childhood classroom.

In talking about the current state of play, Hirsh-Pasek et al., (2009) argue that, “Didactic teaching of the body of academic facts deemed essential for “success” in today’s schools is squeezing out developmentally appropriate education in the early years, the cornerstone of which

is rich, playful experiences aimed at developing the whole child” (p. 6). Echoing Siegel’s concerns, Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2004) have also written extensively about play being “under siege” and “children’s play being under attack” in the United States. In a parallel way, in 2009, Miller and Almon wrote an executive summary titled, *Crisis in the Kindergarten* to document the loss of play in kindergartens across the United States. In a serious manner, Miller and Almon (2009) state, “Kindergarten, long a beloved institution in American culture, is in crisis” (p. 11). The authors also affirm that, “The traditional kindergarten classroom that most adults remember from childhood- with plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills, and learning to enjoy learning-has largely disappeared” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 11). Furthermore, Miller and Almon (2009) remind us that, “Today there are mounting reports of stressed-out kindergartners, behavior problems including uncontrollable anger and aggression, and expulsion of young children from school, a problem that is particularly severe for young boys” (p. 21). Significantly, in the document, the authors disclose nine studies that show the implications in regards to what this push-down curriculum is having on children’s learning and development. In 2011 Almon and Miller once again write about how “...the crisis in early education in the U.S. continues unabated...” and how the research that shows the benefits of play is “largely ignored” (p. 1). Moreover, Almon and Miller (2011) remind us that, “Numerous studies-some extending decades –show the effectiveness of play-based education that combines hands-on learning with child-initiated play” (p. 1).

Another advocate of play is David Elkind (2007a) who has written broadly about different issues pertaining to the consequences of a hurried childhood to children’s overall well-being. As such, Elkind (2007a) proposed a developmental theory of play based on the theoretical underpinnings of Freud and Piaget. According to Elkind (2007a), importantly, “Love, work, and

play are three inborn drives that power human thought and action throughout the life cycle” (p. 3). Moreover, the author reminds us that, “Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all age levels” (p. 4). In the forward to *Crisis in Kindergarten*, David Elkind wrote, “We have had a politically and commercially driven effort to make kindergarten a one-size- smaller first grade. Why in the world are we trying to teach the elementary curriculum at the early childhood level?” Unfortunately, this is a question that continues to plague researchers and scholars as the decline of play endures while teachers continue to struggle with the demands of a push-down curriculum.

From a similar standpoint, Nicolopoulou (2010) writes about the loss of play, the dichotomy between play and work and offers suggestions on what needs to be done to counteract this pressing issue. “Play is being squeezed out of early childhood education in the US,” writes Nicolopoulou (2010). In talking about play, Nicolopoulou further states (2010):

“Across the board, play is being displaced by a single-minded focus on teaching academic skills through direct instruction. This emphasis on more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool education comes at the expense of more child –centered, play – oriented, and constructivist approaches, which are dismissed as obsolete or simply crowded out” (p. 1).

As discussed at length, the decline of play is an issue that should be taken seriously (Frost, 2010, 2012; Gray, 2014a, 2014b). For such reasons, more researchers, scholars, practitioners and advocates of play need to reassess how to further advocate for this human right because to date, play continues to be eradicated from diverse early childhood settings and the

consequences of this could be very serious as argued by several prominent researchers (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Frost, 2010; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014b).

Teachers' Role in Children's Play

Play, as confirmed throughout the literature review, serves as a medium for learning and developing in all domains and is recognized as a developmentally appropriate practice by the National Association for Young Children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). While there is plenty of research that confirms that play has value, the teacher's role in children's play has been a much-debated subject within the field of early childhood education (Ashiabi, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Lillemyer, 2009).

Researchers concur that this issue comes from the long-standing idea that teachers should not interfere in children's play (Johnson et al., 2005; Lillemyer, 2009). From this perspective, instead, teachers are expected to set the stage for play and observe the play of their young students. The impetus for this belief might have come from the research of Mildred Parten (1932) who according to Smolucha & Smolucha (1998) "...developed the first formal definition of solitary play and the first actual assessment of it" through her work in observing children between the ages of one to five, at a day care center (p. 39). With respect to the role of the teacher in children's play, Isaacs (1933) also believed that the teacher's part in play is mostly passive in nature with the goal of creating an appropriate environment for learning and observing children. In a similar way to Parten (1932) and Isaacs (1933), Piaget (1951/1962) believed that pretend play commences as a solitary activity, in which children construct knowledge independently and that teachers should not direct or interfere in the children's self-initiated play. Furthermore, Smolucha and Smolucha (1998) point out that, "Both Parten's studies and Piaget's

studies at the Rousseau Institute documented a shift from solitary-to-social play in group facilities where adults did not direct the play activities of the children” (p. 39).

In contrast, Smilansky (1968) disagreed with the traditional method which proposed that “The adult’s role, or the function of the kindergarten teacher, is one of nonintervention, no active guidance, in order to enable the child to investigate his environment and learn from his own experience” (p. 92). Thus, the literature shows that a major paradigm shift occurred in play scholarship in the 1960’s with the seminal work of Sara Smilansky (1968) with disadvantaged Israeli children (Johnson, 2014). Smilansky’s work, titled, *The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children* (1968), demonstrated that adults could assist children from underprivileged homes in learning how to engage in sociodramatic play.

In the 1970s, Vygotsky’s work became well known and increasingly respected by the early childhood community. As stated by Jones and Reynolds (2011) “Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism inspired a shift in early childhood education that places a teacher in an active role as co-player and co-investigator with children during their play and work” (p. 4). The authors further note, that from a Vygotskian standpoint:

“The teacher is a resource to children. Also, he designs situations and interventions to scaffold a child’s learning, structuring comfortable guidance to match what the child already knows and can do to encourage her to practice a challenging task with assistance” (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p. 4).

Because of the work of Smilansky (1968) and Vygotsky (1978) and others, the different roles that a teacher can take during children’s play became well known during the 90’s (File, 1994; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Enz & Christie, 1997; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Through their extensive experience in observing and working with early childhood teachers, Jones and

Reynolds developed six roles that teachers can take during children's play to enhance their learning and presented these roles in their book, *The Play's the Thing* in 1992. More recently, Jones and Reynolds (2011) wrote a second edition, adding to their seminal work. According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), the six roles that the teacher should take in children's play are as follows:

1. Stage manager
2. Mediator
3. Player
4. Scribe
5. Assessor and communicator
6. Planner (p. 20).

While Jones and Reynolds (2011) highlighted six different roles, Hadley (2002) found that teachers have two functions in children's play. According to Hadley (2002), teachers are either "inside the flow" or "outside the flow" of play. Ashiabi (2007) points out that "When a teacher is outside the flow, his/her involvement in play is meant to prompt reflection on the part of the children, which may lead to the modification and extension of play" (p. 203). Teachers take on the role of a participant when they are situated "inside the flow" of a play situation (Hadley, 2002). Moreover, Ashiabi (2007) asserts that teachers play different roles such as the ones proposed by Jones and Reynolds (1992, 2011) while they are inside or outside the flow of play and that it is critical that teachers are mindful of what they say or do during their participation in children's play.

The literature revealed that empirical studies about the obstacles to the implementation of play in early childhood classrooms have also been disseminated (Kagan, 1990). Kagan (1990)

for instance, found that attitudinal, structural and functional obstacles prevent teachers from implementing play in the classroom. From this perspective, according to Ashiabi (2007) some teachers might believe that play interferes with what children should be learning. This stance, for example, is succinctly illustrated by Sandra Stone (1995), who pointed out that teachers feel uncertain in justifying and valuing play, and states the following:

“What we find across our nation are educators who have or are unwittingly sacrificing play in their endeavors to reach prescribed academic goals. Even teachers who know the importance of play to a child’s development find themselves on the defensive when questioned about play in their classrooms. We have become too embarrassed to give playtime a place because of ‘more important curricular priorities. Hence, play is being reduced to recess time, hidden in the curriculum, or tagged as a miscellaneous free time” (pp. 45-46).

From this vantage point, teachers who know that play is a central element in stimulating cognitive and social competencies seem to struggle with defending its usefulness in the classrooms in part, because of the demands of a standards driven curriculum that only values skills that can be tested (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2012).

Several scholars point out that while some teachers consider that play is vital for young children, “structural barriers” such as “...curricula, time, space and materials” can perplex teachers as to whether and how to integrate play into the curriculum (Kagan, 1990; Ashiabi, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005).

Once again, the literature shows that during the 90’s like in other moments in time, two contradictory paradigms were happening in the field of early childhood education. On one hand, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) continued to revise its

Position Statement by explaining how developmentally appropriate practice should look like in early childhood programs. On the other hand, the 90's is also known as "the decade of the brain" when research on the importance of synaptic connectivity during young children's first three years of life was disseminated and had a great influence on the education of young children because educators, policy members and other stakeholders felt the need to rush young children into learning by exposing them to developmentally inappropriate activities (Twardosz, 2012, p. 105).

In recent years, the teachers' role in play has continued to be a topic of debate (Almon & Miller, 2011; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Like Jones and Reynolds (1992, 2011), several researchers have proposed that teachers who are knowledgeable about play pedagogy can scaffold children's learning opportunities (Weisberg et al., 2013; Wood, 2010). For example, as mentioned in chapter one, the work of Van Hoorn et al., (2015), has been instrumental in highlighting the essential role of the teacher in play. In talking about the role of the teacher in play, Van Hoorn et al., (2015) remind us:

"The knowledgeable teacher uses a wide repertoire of techniques to carefully orchestrate the flow from spontaneous play to guided and directed play to more subject-oriented instruction and back to play. This flow is in tune with and arise from the developmental needs of individual children in the class" (p. 23).

Similarly, the work of Wood (2010, 2013) has proposed that teacher should be responsive to children's play and should be prepared to scaffold children's learning. As such, Wood (2010, 2013) suggests an integrated pedagogical model where both adult-directed and free play activities are encouraged and orchestrated by knowledgeable and flexible teachers who have a deep understanding of play pedagogy.

When considering the teachers role in play, Weisberg and Colleagues (2013) also argue that guided approaches can be beneficial to children’s learning and development. According to Weisberg et al., (2013), this approach is valuable since “Guided play sits between free play and direct instruction”(p. 105). In talking about guided play, Weisberg et al., (2005) remind us that

“ ...the adult role in guided play is active, although not dictatorial; the adult in a guided play situation might initiate the play context but does not direct the play within that context. Rather, the adult follows the child’s lead and allows the child to engage in discovery within the prepared environment...” (p. 106).

Researchers agree that to best understand the relationship between play and learning, teachers must be cognizant about the research base and the role that they will play in providing the right amount and type of play that enhances learning for young children (Wood, 2010, 2013; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). Thus, as affirmed by Bulunz (2012), “...the teacher must listen, observe children, and be willing to see and interpret what the child sees” in order to create the best play opportunities that enhance learning (p. 144).

In sum, the review of the literature revealed that the teachers’ role in children’s play has been a much-debated issue within the field of early childhood education. At the same time, the literature also confirms the significance of the teacher’s knowledge and his/her intentionality in creating a developmentally appropriate environment that interweaves play as fundamental in providing the best learning and developmental opportunities for young children (Van Hoorn et al., 2015).

Teachers’ Beliefs About Play in Early Childhood Education

The following sections examine studies about teachers’ beliefs about play in early childhood education. This section is divided into three areas: (a) studies about beliefs about play

that show a relationship or congruence with teachers' practice, (b) studies where there was no congruence between the teacher's beliefs' about play and their practice, and (c) studies looking at the beliefs about children's play of teachers and others, which include parents, administrators and children.

The literature reveals that some studies have shown that teachers' beliefs have been found to be inconsistent with their teaching practices. For example, in 1997, Bennett, Wood and Rogers conducted a yearlong study of teachers' perceptions of play. Bennett et al., (1997) interviewed nine early childhood teachers who ranged in experience from novices to experts, in order to investigate their theories of play and how these translated into their classroom practice. During the study, the researchers made visits and videotaped classroom play activities. Then, the researchers interviewed participants while they viewed the videotapes of the play that took place in their programs. Interestingly, the findings of Bennett et al., (1997) indicate that the teachers' espoused beliefs were not consistent with their teaching practices.

Further scholarship that showed incongruences between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices is Kemple's (1996) study. In her study about teachers' beliefs and reported practices concerning sociodramatic play, Kemple (1996) found that teachers' beliefs were sometimes inconsistent with their teaching practices. In this study, all participants were female; moreover, eleven were kindergarten teachers and thirteen were preschool teachers. The researcher conducted interviews with each participant designed to "...explore the teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the promotion of sociodramatic play in the classroom" (Kemple, 1996, p. 22). Additionally, participants were verbally asked to respond the 3 rating scale items on a scale of 1-9 survey.

Kemple (1996) stated, “Virtually all teachers in this sample rated sociodramatic play as an important activity for young children ($X=8.73$, $sd=.69$)” (p. 23). Although this finding is significant, the investigator found that while nearly all of the teachers stated that they valued socio-dramatic play and that they provided enough time for such play to take place in the classroom, there was actually a great deal of inconsistency in the amount of time they truly allocated to socio-dramatic play in their classrooms, ranging from fifteen minutes to two hours (Kemple, 1996). Additionally, the teachers’ role in children’s socio-dramatic play was limited primarily to providing time, space, and materials for children to engage in play (Kemple, 1996). Furthermore, Kemple (1996) states, “Compared to preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers provided significantly less time, and were more likely to feel that the time they provided was insufficient” (p. 26). Another important finding in this study is that all but four teachers shared that, “...they could not recall having received information about promoting children’s socio-dramatic play in their preparation for teaching” (p. 28).

Inspired by a phenomenographical research tradition, Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) conducted a qualitative study to “...identify and describe different ways that people conceive, understand, and experience phenomenon in the world around them” (p. 3). The overarching question that guided their study was, “How do preschool teachers remember their own childhood play experiences, and how do they perceive children’s play today?” (p. 2). Purposeful and theoretical sampling was used for the selection of the twenty Swedish preschool teachers that participated in this qualitative study. The main source of data collection was done through “partly structured” interviews conducted at the preschool teacher’s workplace (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003, p. 3). In their study, Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) first transcribed data from interviews and then coded the texts to find patterns of meaning that

resulted into two main themes. Consequently, the themes that emerged were time for play and the effect of media on play. In addition, based on their study's findings, Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) state, "Results from this study suggest that the assumption that play has major importance in preschools is a myth" (p.15). In talking about how preschool teachers perceive play, the authors conclude their study by stating, "Its importance is something that is described in theory, but reality does not seem to reflect its importance" (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003, p. 15).

In a more recent study, teacher perceptions about the role of play in learning were explored in a qualitative study by Ranz-Smith (2007). The participants for this study included two first grade teachers from two social economic settings. Like previous scholarship, the findings from this study revealed that although participants held a common value for play their perceptions on play did not correspond with their classroom practice.

Teachers' beliefs about play have also been studied along with other participants such as children, parents and administrators. For example, Rothlein and Brett (1987) conducted a study with a large sample of participants that consisted of 103 preschool children, 73 parents, and 60 teachers of preschool children. The findings from this study show that participant teachers saw play as being fun as well as providing opportunities for social and cognitive development. However, these same teachers did not see play as being an integral part of the school day, instead they described a learn and play dichotomy that is still being seen today in the 21st century as play being different and separate from learning. According to Rothlein and Brett (1987), "Sixty percent of the teachers included learning in their definition of play, listing cognitive development, social development, creativity and imagination, preparation for future roles, or child's work" and "the other 40% defined it as unstructured activity, exercise, or fun" (p. 4).

Interestingly, parents, who were also participants in this study, were concerned about too much time spent in play.

From a grounded theory framework, Hyvonen (2011) investigated teacher's perspectives of play in a Finnish school context. Participants were Kindergarten through 4th grade teachers. In total, fourteen teachers were interviewed through a thematic plan that included questions about play and games, content in play, and teachers' roles (p. 70). The author states that data obtained were analyzed using the grounded theory approach "data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously using a process of constant comparison" (p. 70). The interviews were transcribed and the data were coded using three sequential coding processes (open, axial and selective) and the Nvivo software. Eight different play types were revealed from data analysis and data reduction. Hyvonen (2011) states that, "this study shows that the teachers' interviews use various play types on educational settings" (p. 77).

In the sections that follow I discuss the studies found in the review of the literature that looked at teacher candidates' beliefs and perspectives about play.

Teacher Candidates' Beliefs About Play in Early Childhood Education

In seeking to discover preservice teachers' beliefs on the definition or categorization of play, Sherwood and Reifel (2010) conducted a basic qualitative study, and utilized intensity sampling to recruit participants. Participants for this study were seven female preservice teachers in an early childhood practicum course in a university located in south central Texas. Data collection was done through the form of interviews, field observations and documents analysis. The researchers found that preservice teachers had individualized definitions of play. Sherwood and Reifel (2010) state, "...play seemed to have an individualized meaning consisting of multiple parts" (p. 329).

To conclude, the researchers assert:

“Although each of the preservice teachers used the term *play* based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, *play* had an individualized meaning. And these individualized beliefs about what constitutes play led to divergent beliefs about which activities counted as play and what underlying qualities made an individual activity play” (p. 334).

In 2012, Bulunuz conducted a study northwest of Turkey to “...examine Turkish preservice teachers’ understanding of the integration of play and science in teaching preschoolers and to examine the effect on attitudes of a course designed to teach science through playful experiences” (p. 142). Participants were 94 “senior” preservice teachers who were enrolled in two sections of a science methods course (p. 142). A critical component of this study was the curricular design of the course which was created to meet the 2006 curriculum objectives on teaching play-based learning. Therefore, Bulunuz (2012) planned the class in a way that allowed preservice teachers to experience different science concepts and experiments through playful play-based activities (p. 141). As a primary curricular tool of instruction, the author utilized the Play-Debrief-Replay three-stage model to allow preservice teachers to experience the play and science connection. Playful experiences in teacher preparation programs are critical given that “Teaching through play-based activities with active participation of children is emphasized as a central strategy to achieve all objectives in the 2006 Turkish Preschool Education Curriculum” (p. 142). Bulunuz (2012) asserts that, “Using the Play-Debrief-Replay model in the science methods class helped to build the preservice teacher’s own understanding while modeling teaching methods appropriate for preschool classrooms” (p. 147). In addition, the author explained, “In order to model the integration of play and science, the course applied the principle

of “playing and-learning pedagogy” (Pramling Samuelsson, 2006, p.117, as cited in Bulunuz, 2012, p. 147). Furthermore, Bulunuz (2012) states that a textbook was not used and also indicates that class activities were mostly taken from the work of play researchers and also from “...local materials and resources” (p. 148).

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews at the beginning and at the end of the course were used as data sources. Moreover, the Playful Science Survey (Jarrett & Burnley, 2010) was used to evaluate participants’ attitudes and the function of playfulness and class atmosphere in learning and teaching science (Bulunuz, 2012). The author of this study (Bulunuz, 2012) declares that “...the students were also asked to rate playfulness and interestingness of the science activities provided in the science methods course, their enjoyment of assignments in the field placement, opportunities of playful social interactions with peers, and relaxedness of the classroom environment” (p. 149). A final source of data was the student’s reflections on their field placement implementation. Qualitative analysis was used to analyze pre and post open-ended questionnaires and interview transcripts. Additionally, participant’s written explanations on the open-ended questionnaire, verbally reposted explanations in the interviews, the author’s field observations of their teaching and their field placement reports on teaching science through play allowed for triangulation of multiple data sources to show validity of the research. Bulunuz’s (2012) study resulted in the following themes: children play with materials and ideas as they actively participate, teacher’ dialogue and questioning promotes exploration and variation in activity, children who are actively exploring can find answers by themselves and construct cause and effect relationships. The results from the Playful Science Survey indicated that the preservice teachers demonstrated a positive attitude at the end of the semester based on a high mean rating (Bulunuz, 2012).

In 2012, Cheng also conducted a qualitative case study about preservice early childhood teachers' conceptualizations of play and their practice. The researcher of this study sought answers to the following two questions: 1. What is the conception of teaching through play as understood by the pre-service teachers? 2. How does the conception of teaching through play develop with the experience student teachers receive in his/her course of teacher education program? This study took place in Hong Kong. The participants were two early childhood preservice teachers who according to Cheng (2012), "...were recommended by their teacher educator as those who were "teachers with potential" (p. 71). Semi-structured interviews were conducted for each of the four phases of the data collection to capture the participant's understanding of play. In order to tap into pre-service teachers conceptualization of play, Cheng (2012) utilized Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) model of reflection, which includes three levels of reflective activity. They are as follows: "reflection-for-action", "reflection-in action", and "reflection on action" (Cheng, 2012). In addition, as quoted by Cheng (2012), "Besides, the informants' lesson plans, assignments, and their reflective journals of their field experience were also used to make sense of the development of the informants' tactic knowledge" (p. 70). The author asserted that "...the employment of diverse means enable the researcher to take account of many variables through the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence" (p. 69).

The findings for this study showed that in regards to the conceptualization of play and learning, both participants "...had good articulation on the significance of it for the development of young children, yet, they did not have a clear perception of the theory in context nor were they able to identify and be prepared to face the difficulties of enacting play" (Cheng, 2012, p. 78). During the course of study, the participants seemed to value play but as soon as they were faced with "the constraints of reality" they went back to traditional teaching practices (p. 79). Cheng

(2012) affirms "...this conception could not be sustained as it was held vulnerably by the informants because Chinese culture values "diligence" not "play" (p. 79).

Drawing from an interpretive paradigm, Vera and Geneser (2012) used a basic qualitative method to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions' about play. A university in the southwestern part of the United States was the context for this study. Fifty pre-service teachers who were pursuing EC- 6th grade teaching certifications participated. Participants were required to create, implement and reflect, on a lesson which integrated a playful activity in a content area (p. 6). In order to capture students' perceptions about their experience, a survey that included open-ended questions was utilized to collect data. Then, content analysis was utilized to analyze data from the surveys. Vera and Geneser (2012) found that pre-service teachers exhibited concerns about managing play in the classroom. As stated by Vera and Geneser (2012), "Space, time, and curriculum..." became a challenging part of the field-based assignment (p. 9).

More recently, Sherwood and Reifel (2013) conducted a qualitative study that utilized a basic qualitative methodology guided by an interpretivist paradigm for data collection and data analysis. Sherwood and Reifel (2013) examined the following question: What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in learning? The study took place at Hawkins University in south central Texas and the participants for this study were seven preservice teachers enrolled in an early childhood through grade four practicum course. The selection of the participants was done through purposeful sampling. The authors highlight that data collection for this research was drawn from an earlier study (e.g., Sherwood, 2009). Regarding their research, Sherwood and Reifel (2013) clarify that this study "...focuses on data collected during the interviews, member-checks, and document analysis portions of the study" (p. 270). As such, the authors explain that, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the seven

participants for about 60 minutes. The interviews were audio taped and during the interview, participants had to categorize activities as "...play, not-play or middle" (Sherwood, 2013, p. 270). The results of the participants' categorization of play prompted Sherwood and Reifel (2013) to ask several follow-up questions. Moreover, Sherwood and Reifel (2013) utilized different qualitative techniques for analysis such as reading and re-reading of data, and documentation of data through analytic memos, and ongoing descriptive accounts. Then categories and themes were identified. Through the analysis of two main categories, Sherwood and Reifel's (2013) study found that "...the preservice teachers seemed to believe paradoxically that play is valuable and not essential to learning and development" (p. 272). Drawing from their findings, the authors state that, "The preservice teachers' belief that play is valuable and not essential to learning matches the current position of play the early childhood education" (p. 277).

In a recent study Jung and Jin (2014) looked at future professionals' perceptions of play. The authors sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the perception of play in early childhood classrooms differ by college student's class year?
2. Does experience in play-related courses in college provide a relationship between college students' perceptions of play and learning in early childhood classrooms?

Jung and Jin (2014) used a purposeful sample that consisted of future professionals enrolled in education and child-and-family-related courses. The Future Professionals Survey (FPS) was created by the researchers, as a tool to collect data. In order to answer the research questions, "Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if there were significant differences in the overall FPS scores and subscales scores based on individual characteristics, including class year and whether they took play-related courses" (p. 31).

The results indicate that “...future professionals in their freshmen and sophomore years in college hold a relatively positive perception of play in early childhood education” however, “...starting as juniors in college, their perception demonstrated a notable different pattern (p. 5). Jung and Jin (2014) assert that enrolling in a play-related course in college appears to help participants “...in maintaining positive perceptions of play, as students who took play-related courses appeared to maintain their positive perception of play in early childhood classrooms until their senior year” (p. 27).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the literature surveyed for this study. The chapter is divided into three major sections, which are as follows: Value of play in early childhood education, Teachers’ role in play, and Teacher candidates’ beliefs about play. The following chapter presents the study’s methodology.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I begin by taking a reflective stance and situating my position within a social constructivist framework (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Subsequently, I restate the study's purpose and research questions. Then, this information is followed by a description of the study's methodology and research design. Specifically, this chapter discusses the methods used to collect and analyze data. This chapter also describes the sampling procedures used to recruit participants and presents detailed profiles of participants in order to illustrate their academic and educational experiences. Furthermore, the chapter presents the steps taken to achieve quality, rigor and trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations followed throughout the current study.

Positionality, Reflexivity and Assumptions

Due to the interpretive and emergent nature of qualitative research, in this study, I served as a primary instrument in data collection and analysis. As Merriam (2009) reminds us, the instrument for data collection and analysis needs to be "...responsive and adaptive..." (p.15). As a principal instrument, I acknowledge that my own positionality and the coalescence of my personal, educational, and professional experiences affected the data collection and analysis process. From a social constructivist perspective, I also recognize that this study's methodology was socially co-constructed through the interaction with the self and with the participants of this

research study. As Jewett (2008) reminds us, "...methodology itself is a kind of dance of self and other" (p. 10). Similarly, Glesne (2011) tells us that, "The role of the social scientist is to then become that of assessing other's interpretations of some social phenomenon and of interpreting, themselves, other's actions and intentions" (p. 8).

From a reflective stance, I bring to this study what I have lived and experienced as a Mexican-American woman, born, raised and educated in South City. South City, which shares a border with Mexico, is considered to be a low social economic working community that is populated principally by Hispanics of Mexican descent (U.S. Census, 2014). As a third-generation Mexican-American, I was raised in a working class family with traditional values. Spanish, is my first language and today I am bi-literate in both Spanish and English. While growing up in the Rio Grande Valley, I attended public school (elementary, middle school & high school) in South City.

As a first-generation college student, during my Bachelor, Master and Doctoral studies, I was a non-traditional student who is also a mother of four, presently ranging in ages 3-18. After earning my Master degree in Early Childhood Education, I spent the past eight years working at South City University. During this time, I worked as a Lecturer, Instructional Specialist and Student Teacher Supervisor, teaching a variety of courses for three different departments in the College of Education.

It should be noted, that I was an insider in this study since my background resembles some of the characteristics of the participants. For example, being female, Hispanic, labeled a non-traditional student, being bi-literate and growing up in the same community, were some of the shared characteristics among the participants and myself, during this study.

In this light, I believe that an insider position was useful for me as a researcher in that I was able to build rapport with the participants, which subsequently allowed me to gather sufficient data about the lived experiences of the respondents.

One of the central tenets of qualitative inquiry is to identify a topic of interest. As such, this study emerged while I was pursuing a doctoral degree in Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a Specialization in Early Childhood. In hindsight, my interest to study play arose during this time. The multiple experiences afforded through the mentorship of an early childhood professor were instrumental in this decision. Specifically, I decided on researching the topic of play when I served as a presenter at a play conference in San Antonio, Texas. In addition, during this play conference, I had the opportunity to experience live lectures by renowned play experts.

In retrospect, my experience as a doctoral student, and as a teacher educator and mother, served as the impetus for researching the topic of play. Eight years of experience in preparing predominantly Hispanic teacher candidates to teach served as a research lens for this study. For example, throughout the past eight years, I gained knowledge and experience in working with teacher candidates and preparing them with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to work with diverse learners such as ELLs, students with special needs, gifted and talented students and certainly, with diverse learners in early childhood (0-8) (NCATE, 2010-2014). Thus, my positionality as a female, Hispanic teacher educator, who teaches early childhood classes, where the topic of play is part of the course's objectives, were also influences that affected the data collection and analysis processes.

As noted above, I acknowledge that my background and professional experiences affected the data collection and analysis for this study. For example, as a teacher educator, I had the opportunity to work in close proximity with teacher candidates that were seeking different

degrees in education. In this light, these experiences allowed me to learn how to listen carefully to students and to ask open-ended questions with follow up probes during class lectures. From this perspective, I recognize that these skills were beneficial in conducting in-depth interviews during this study.

As a teacher educator, I had ample opportunities to learn about how to prepare teacher candidates through continued training, education and research. Thus, my knowledge of teaching has increased through listening to teacher candidates about their inquiries and concerns regarding their future teaching responsibilities. As a reflective practitioner, I realized that one of the major issues raised during class discussions and assignments were teacher candidates' concerns about whether they would be able to implement the curricular approaches to teaching young children, such as play pedagogy, of which I fervently spoke about during class. In essence, these inquiries and my continued belief in the value of play as fundamental to children's healthy learning and development lead me to choose play as my research topic.

During this study, it was important for me to become aware of my biases and subjectivities in order to enter the study with an open mind (Peshkin, 1998). According to Peshkin (1998), our subjectivities "...can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (p. 18). As a researcher, having this understanding was significant for me because one does not experience life with an empty slate (Dey, 1999); rather, one brings to the research the conceptualization of experiences and lived realities. As Dey clearly (1999) purports, "...there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head"(p. 251).

As previously stated, as the researcher of this study, I recognize that in qualitative research, professional and personal life experiences coalesce and become part of the research process and outcomes. As Birks and Mills remind us, (2015) “Researchers are the sum of all they have experienced” (p. 11). Fundamentally, I acknowledge that my age, ethnicity, culture, gender, class, language, and the multiplicity of previous experiences as a mother, doctoral students and a teacher educator, are some of the filters through which I see the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). During each phase of this research study, I remained open to seeing what could be learned through each phase of the research process (Charmaz, 2014). As a result, I felt that my prior knowledge and experiences should be rendered as a form of transparency and trustworthiness, which are integral elements in qualitative research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

In order to construct a logical and solid research design, I chose a research paradigm that was congruent with my ontological and epistemological beliefs about the nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, the lens that was used to structure this study is interpretive, meaning that social life is seen and therefore interpreted by me as the researcher as it is perceived in my own mind (Saldaña, 2015). Also, there is an understanding that participant’s meaning making does not exist outside of social context but rather reality is constructed in reciprocal relation to the particular social context within which meaning coexists (Vygotsky, 1978). As Merriam (2009) explains, “...reality is socially constructed, that is there is no single observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (p. 8). Essentially, an interpretive lens assumes reality is constructed socially and experientially (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

A social constructivist perspective, which falls under the umbrella of interpretivism, was used as an epistemological lens to frame this study. Social constructivism resists the

epistemological stance that objective and invariable truth exist and that it lasts eternally (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Instead, under social constructivism, truth and knowledge are considered to be co-constructed in relation to social experiences, which are changeable and fluid. From this standpoint, these changes in thought processes depend on the social and physical contexts where people construct reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). From this epistemological stance, I assume that the construction of meaning is the result of the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participant (Saldaña, 2015). Of importance, are the participants' and researcher's history as well as the contexts (Vygotsky, 1978) in which the construction of meaning takes place (Birks & Mills, 2015; Saldaña, 2015).

Drawing from Charmaz (2008), from a social constructivist perspective, I made the following assumptions in this present study:

“(1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it” (p. 402).

Essentially, a social constructivist perspective underpinned this study. By adopting this perspective, I recognize that knowledge is socially co-constructed within a social cultural and historical context. Fundamentally, this standpoint influenced my data collection and analysis process in this study. In the sections that follow, I discuss the problem statement, purpose of the study and the research questions that guided this investigation.

Problem Statement, Purpose and Research Questions

Play has been recognized as a hallmark of early childhood for its personal and educational value (Frost et al., 2012). Paradoxically, as discussed at length in chapters one and two, due to multiple and interrelated factors, the use of play as a developmentally appropriate pedagogical tool in early childhood is being replaced by didactic instruction and activities that produce measurable outcomes. As a result of these curricular tensions, practicing teachers feel pressured to teach young children in ways that are not developmentally appropriate and which often exclude play from the curriculum (Almon, 2003, 2004; Almon & Miller, 2011; Wood, 2014).

In this light, Hispanic teacher candidates in South City have reportedly grappled with the challenges of making sense between the rhetoric and reality of the educational value of play. As the researcher of this study, I observed this problem while preparing teacher candidates in a teacher education program in South city. Through lectures and diverse projects, teacher candidates in South City University, expressed that they often do not observe play as part of the early childhood classroom despite the national and global recognition that is given to play as a staple in children's learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Researchers suggest that teacher candidates beliefs about play are influenced by the preparation they receive in their teacher preparation programs, in juxtaposition with their own personal beliefs about play (Jonhson et al., 2005). Because the teacher candidates who took part in this study will possibly teach in a context that is driven by accountability, they will conceivably need to have positive beliefs about play that value its role in children's learning and development given that their beliefs about play will possibly influence if and how they will utilize play in their future classrooms.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development. Additionally, I sought to uncover what influences possibly shaped these beliefs and how these influences were conceivably shaped. The following research questions guided this study.

1. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play?
Do they value play and if so, how and why?
2. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitute play?
3. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development in early childhood education?
4. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play?
5. What influenced Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play? How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidate's beliefs about the value of play?

Conceptual Framework

To frame this study, I drew from the work of three complementary social constructivist scholars. Specifically, I drew from the work of Dewey (1938) regarding the value of active participation and educative experiences in learning. Secondly, due to the complexity of defining and studying beliefs (Fives & Gill, 2015) Nespor's (1987) theory on beliefs was used as an additional framework. According to Nespor (1987), four influences shape beliefs in a synergistic manner. Nespor (1987) identified these influences in the following way: (a) existential presumption, (b) alternativity, (c) affective and evaluative loading, and (d) episodic storage. Significantly, Nespor's (1987) scholarship has been an instrumental tool utilized by many

scholars to interpret their own research on beliefs. Recently, Sherwood and Reifel (2010, 2013) published two studies based on the first author's dissertation on preservice teachers' beliefs about play completed in 2009 and in their research, the authors utilize Nespor's (1987) work to uncover their participants' beliefs about the meaning of play.

Given the nature of the stated research questions, and the complexity of empirically studying beliefs about the value of play, Vygotsky's (1986) notion of conceptual formation was also utilized to uncover the experiences that possibly led to the participants' beliefs about the value of play. Additionally, I drew significantly from Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) view that the social, cultural, and historical context impacts humans' experience (Samaras, 2002; Wertsch, 1985).

Essentially, these theoretical perspectives, which are grounded in social constructivism, shaped the research questions and also influenced the analysis for this qualitative study with constructivist grounded theory methods. The inclusion of the epistemological and ontological lens used to underpin the methods for this study was an important part of showing the logic of inquiry for me as the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the following section, I provide a brief explanation of constructivist grounded theory, followed by my rationale for using this method.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was first introduced to the field of research, by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in 1967, with the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since its inception, multiple versions have evolved. Creswell (2013) explains that there are two popular approaches to grounded theory: (1) The systematic procedures proposed by

Strauss & Corbin (1990, 2008) and (2) the social constructivist approach proposed by Charmaz (2014). For this study, a qualitative constructivist grounded theory approach was used, which is based on the model proposed by Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2014). Charmaz (2014) is a former student of Glaser and Strauss, and has risen as a leading constructivist grounded theory exponent (2006; 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), "... grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data themselves. Thus, researchers construct a theory "grounded in their data"(p. 1). Further, Charmaz (2008) explains her constructivist method by stating:

"Rather than assuming that theory emerges from data, constructionists assume that researchers construct categories of the data. Instead of aiming to achieve parsimonious explanations and generalizations devoid of context, constructionists aim for an interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon that accounts for context. As opposed to giving priority to the researcher's views, constructionists see participants' views and voices as integral to the analysis—and its presentation" (p.402).

Charmaz's (2014) quote above encapsulates the essence of constructivist grounded theory, in that the researcher is a co-constructor of the data in the process of rendering a theoretical interpretation.

Rationale for Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods

In approaching this study qualitatively, using features of constructivist grounded theory was a solid methodological choice suited for this study's purpose. First, a significant reason why this method was a good fit for this study was because of the minimal existing research found through the literature surveyed about this study's topic. Constructivist grounded theory

approaches allowed me to build an interpretive theory on a topic that is central in early childhood education, and that has not been explored enough, mainly, Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play and how these beliefs were possibly shaped.

Given the complexity of the topic of play and beliefs, a second reason to use these methods was to move beyond a mere description of an experience to an interpretive theory generated from these experiences and grounded in the data that emerged during the study (Charmaz, 2014). The usefulness of grounded theory is that "... it allows for a theoretical explanation" that can be used to study meanings, actions, or a process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 107). According to Creswell (2013), the development of a "theoretical explanation" as proposed by Corbin & Strauss (2008) emerges from the data "grounded" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) from participants who have experienced a process. As such, this study examined the meaning making process of how participants' beliefs about the value of play appeared to have been shaped.

The third and final reason that I chose this method is that grounded theory methods allowed for flexibility in comparing and contrasting data as it emerged (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because of its interpretive nature, this method allowed me to interpret and construct the data while capturing the participants' experiences (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Above all, the constructivist grounded theory method in this study (Charmaz, 2014) offered me specific guidelines and procedures for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data which fit with the particular purpose of this study (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007).

For all these reasons, I decided a constructivist grounded theory approach was most suitable for exploring Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play in learning and development and how these beliefs are shaped.

Setting

Context

This study took place in South Texas in a city that is situated in the Rio Grande Valley², which is comprised of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy (Valerio-Jiménez, 2013). Specifically, the study was conducted in South City³, which geographically shares a border with Tamaulipas, Mexico. As indicated by the United States Census (2014), the majority of the community members in South City identify themselves as Hispanic of Mexican descent. According to the U.S Census (2014), Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing racial/ethnic minority group in the country. Current data reveals (U.S. Census, 2010) that there has been a significant growth in the Hispanic population since 1970. According to demographic data retrieved from the U.S. Census (2010), in 1970, Hispanics comprised only 4.5% of the United States population and then increased to an astounding 16% in 2010. According to Motel and Patten (2012) this demographic increment makes the Hispanic population the largest Non-White population in the United States (U.S. Census, 2010). Motel and Patten (2012) also state that Hispanics of Mexican descent are the largest sub-group comprising about 64% of all Hispanics in the United States.

South City is located in an area that is considered one of the fastest growing areas in Texas; however, it is still identified as a low social economic area where many residents live in severe poverty (U.S. Census, 2014; Valerio-Jiménez, 2013). What is compelling about this

² Geographic area located in the southernmost tip of Texas comprised of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy.

³ South City is a fictitious name used to protect the identity of the context in which this study took place and it will be used throughout this study.

setting are its geographical and cultural characteristics, mainly, that it is a border region⁴ and as such, the people who reside in this area can be described as people with a blend of cultures, what Jupp (2001; 2013) referred to as “diversity within diversity”. Essentially, it is a region with a rich history, where newly arrived immigrants, become part of a community where citizens have resided for many generations (Valerio-Jiménez, 2013). South city is situated in an area where predominantly Mexican and American traditions and cultural behaviors intertwine and shape the way people who live in this transnational geographic region interact and co-construct their view of the world (Valerio-Jiménez, 2013).

This demographic data is significant to this study given that the participants who took part in this research identified themselves as Hispanic, and also as having lived transnational lives. Although the data presented clearly indicates that this population is increasing, limited research continues to exist about Hispanic Teacher Candidates, in particular, there was no research found on teacher candidates’ beliefs from the United States and Mexico border region.

The University. In this study, participants were recruited from a Hispanic Serving university⁵, South City University⁶, which serves a 91% Hispanic student body. During the fall semester of 2014, when the data collection phase of this study concluded, there was a total enrollment of 8, 613 students. According the university’s website, 91% (7, 841) of the students attending this university identified as Hispanic. The remaining 9% of the students enrolled identified as 5.9% (504) White, 1.3% (111) Asian, 0.9% (81) Black, 0.1 % (10) American India and 0.8 % (65) as other. This data is consistent with research that confirms that Hispanics are

⁵ Hispanic Serving Universities serve at least a 25% Hispanic student body.

⁶ South City University is a fictitious name used to protect the identity of the university from which participants were recruited for this study. South City University is the name that appears throughout this study.

becoming the largest Non-White group of college students in the United States (Fry, 2009, 2011; Nuñez, et al., 2015). Moreover, of the students enrolled, 41% were identified as male and 58% were identified as female. In the following sections, information about the participants and how they were selected for this study is rendered.

Teacher Education Program in South City University. The College of Education in this university offers degrees on a Bachelor level, Master and Doctoral level. Recently, the College of Education, in South City University, became accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010-2014). This accreditation means that it is recognized as a college that meets the standards of this national accrediting organization. The college of education, has a three-fold mission which is as follows:

- Prepare highly skilled professionals to assume roles and positions in teaching, research, educational leadership and human development.
- Provide undergraduate and graduate programs grounded in evidence-based professional practice, collaboration, knowledge acquisition, reflective inquiry, pedagogical leadership, and respect for the cultural and linguistically diverse learners.
- Continuously assert ourselves as an integral part of local, state, national and international scholarly networks and communities of practice that promote innovation and contribute to scientific, educational, economic and social change.

The Environment and Early Childhood Education Course. All ten participants for this study were recruited from three sections of a course titled, *The Environment and Early Childhood Education*. This course is a requirement for teacher candidates who are seeking different degrees in teaching (see Table 3.2 for the different degrees sought by participants). There are only two courses that specifically focus in early childhood education within the college

of education, and this course is one of the two. Importantly, the purpose of the course is to prepare teacher candidates to learn about how to plan and organize an educational environment that is developmentally appropriate and conducive to teaching diverse learners (Bullard, 2014). Per the course syllabus, course objectives are aligned with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation program. Table 3.1 provides the alignment chart as it appears on the course syllabus.

Table 3.1: Course Objectives

Objectives of Course	Standard One: Promoting Child Development and Learning	Standard Two: Building Family and Community Relations	Standard Three: Observing, Documenting and Assessing	Standard Four: Using Developmentally Appropriate Approaches	Standard Five: Using Content Knowledge to Build Meaningful Curriculum	Standard Six: Becoming a Professional	Standard Seven: Early Childhood Field Experiences
Identifying Current Research	X			X			
High Quality Environments	X		X	X	X		
Strategies, Materials Equipment	X	X	X		X	X	X
Stages of Children							
Exploration and Play	X	X	X	X			X
Design A learning Environment	X			X		X	
Individual Students	X		X		X		X
Instructional Approaches	X	X		X		X	X

The alignment of the course objectives with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation program was significant to this study because it showed that the professor prepared the course with the recommended developmentally appropriate standards.

At the time that this study took place, the three sections of this course (two in the spring and one in the summer) were taught by Dr. Dubai⁷, who is a full professor with over 21 years of professional teaching experience at this same university. During the time of the study, she was also the early childhood education coordinator. Although this course was not designated as a Play Theory course, Dr. Dubai included different projects and assignments that integrated play pedagogy that allowed students to gain a deeper understanding of the value of play in children's learning and development. For example, this course integrated service learning opportunities that were aligned with course objectives and NAEYC Standards to support content learning and to afford teacher candidates with opportunities to observe, plan and evaluate children's learning, development, and play. Collecting data from such a course was significant for this study, given that I sought to explore the beliefs of participants who had experienced play in multiple venues, such as the service-learning community play day.

Sampling Procedures

Interpretivist researchers typically select each of their participants with purpose or *purposefully* (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2002). According to Merriam (2002) "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p.77). For Patton (2002), "...the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term "purposeful sampling"(p. 230).

⁷ Dr. Dubai is a fictitious name used to protect the identity of the professor that took on the role of Gatekeeper by facilitating the researcher with access to recruit participants for this study.

Part of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) includes selecting participants that meet the criterion set by the researcher. As suggested by Merriam (2009), I began the process of selecting participants who would render rich information about the phenomenon that is play, but also by selecting the criteria that was suitable for this study's purpose. Therefore, participants were invited to participate in this study based on the following criteria. Participants were chosen because they identified themselves as Hispanic or Mexican-American. Additionally, participants were selected because they were teacher candidates seeking a bachelor degree in education or had earned a bachelor degree and were now pursuing an alternative education certification to teach. Thirdly, participants were selected because they were enrolled in a teacher education program in the state of Texas. The state of Texas, according to Jerald (2001), is considered one that is driven by testing to meet accountability demands. A clear example of this is that Texas gives prominence to teaching that is in line with the Texas Knowledge and Essential Skills kindergarten curriculum standards (Texas Education Agency, 2010). According to Sherwood and Reifel (2013):

“Three fourths of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Kindergarten is dedicated to the academic content areas such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. These standards give a cursory nod to play in content areas outside of academic subject matter, such as theater arts, music, health and physical education; but the standards do not describe how play can encourage learning in areas such as language arts, math, science and social studies (p. 277).

What the preceding information means, is that these future professionals have been conducting observations in Texas, in particular in the Rio Grande Valley, and will need to be in touch with their beliefs about teaching, which should include an understanding of the value of

play as part of the curriculum as recommended by many scholars, and renowned practitioners (Johnson et al., 2015; VanHoorn et al., 2015; Wood, 2013).

Furthermore, the participants were chosen because they were enrolled in a section of ECED 4389, *The Environment and Early Childhood Education*. The selection of this course was made on the basis that Dr. Dubai integrates play pedagogy as a constructive element that is integral to the environmental design of a developmentally appropriate classroom (Bullard, 2014). The professor's method in using an integrated approach to teaching her students through active participation in play experiences, such as service learning in the form of a community play day as part of the course requirements, was a purposeful reason for including her students as participants for this research study. Subsequently, after recruiting eight participants in the spring semester, the data collected and analyzed led me to make the conscious decision to recruit more participants for this study, with the intent of gathering more data to focus on elaborating and refining emerging categories (Charmaz, 2014, p.193). As a result, two more participants, for a total of ten, were recruited to participate in this study. As recommended by Charmaz (2014), theoretical sampling was used as a strategy in this study to narrow the focus of the emerging categories. As proposed by Dey (1999) "theoretical sufficiency" was reached after these two participants' data were analyzed and coalesced with previous concepts (p. 257).

As explained above, the ten participants who chose to participate in this study satisfied the criteria that I originally established and were therefore deemed suitable respondents.

Participants

In the present study, I assigned pseudonyms⁸ to all participants, in order to ensure confidentiality. Specifically, participants were identified with the number of the order in which

⁸ In study the context, the gatekeeper, and each of the participants that were involved in this study, were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

they were interviewed, to again protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality. At the outset, fifteen teacher candidates expressed interest in participating in this study and signed initial consent forms. Clearly, I initially anticipated collecting data from most of the participants who had signed a consent form; however, after several attempts via telephone and e-mail to schedule appointments, eight teacher candidates took part in the first phase of this study. Two additional participants were recruited during Summer I semester from Dr. Duabi's *Early Childhood and the Environment* course. As such, ten teacher candidates took part in the study as previously mentioned. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), at least ten interviews are needed for building a grounded theory (p. 281).

Of the participating teacher candidates, nine were female and one was a male. All participants identified themselves as Hispanic and varied in age from 20 to 45 years of age. Of the ten teacher candidates who took part in this study, eight were bilingual (English & Spanish) and two were monolingual (English). Moreover, participants were in their junior or senior year of college. All of the participants were seeking a bachelor degree in education. However, some were pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies degree (EC-6th grade Bilingual Generalist) and others were seeking an EC-6th Grade/ Special Education (EC-12th) degree. Table 3.2 below renders demographic as well as contextual information. The order in which participants appear on this table follows the same order in which they were interviewed during the study.

Table 3.2: Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Language Spoken	Race/ Ethnicity	Program of Study	Year in Program of Study	Interview Setting

#1	29	Male	English	Hispanic	Special Education EC -12 th	Junior	University Library
#2	24	Female	English & Spanish	Hispanic	Bilingual Generalist EC-6 th	Senior	Starbucks
#3	24	Female	Spanish & English	Hispanic	Special Education, EC-12 th	Senior	Barnes and Noble
#4	20	Female	English	Hispanic	Special Education, EC-12 th	Junior	Barnes and Noble
#5	42	Female	English & Spanish	Hispanic	Generalist EC-6 th / EC-12 th Special Education	Senior	Barnes and Noble

#6	24	Female	Spanish & English	Hispanic	EC-6 th Bilingual Education	Senior	Mall
#7	33	Female	English & Spanish	White/Hi spanic	EC-6 th Bilingual Education	Senior	Starbucks
#8	45	Female	English & Spanish	Hispanic	Special Education, EC-6 th	Senior	University campus
#9	28	Female	English & Spanish	Hispanic	EC-6 th Bilingual Education	Senior	Starbucks
#10	36	Female	English & Spanish	Hispanic	EC-6 th Bilingual Education	Senior	Restaurant

Participant Profiles. Participants' profiles are provided in this chapter in order to render a rich description (Merriam, 2009). This data was gathered primarily from the information sheet that participants completed prior to initial interviews. Additionally, information was also

collected from the data that transpired during the interviews. Essentially, table 3.3 renders a brief synopsis of each participant who took part in this study.

Table 3.3: Participant Profiles

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Profiles</i>
Participant 1	<p>Participant 1 is a 29 year-old Hispanic teacher candidate. He is the only male in this study. He identified himself as the youngest of 10 children. He has 6 brothers and 3 sisters. During the interview he shared he has forty plus nieces and nephews and he enjoys spending time with his family. He is married and although he is not a parent yet, he hopes to have children because he repeatedly said during the interview that he loves children.</p> <p>Participant 1 shared his struggles with his own physical special needs and talked about how his own challenges have motivated him to work with children with special needs. The participant claimed that he plays every day! He plays in his personal life and he also plays during his job as a teacher aid in special education where he works with children with special needs at a High School located in South City.</p>
Participant 2	<p>Participant 2 is a 24-year old Hispanic, Female student, in her senior year. She is married, is a full-time student and a mother of three children (had her first child at 15) and she shares that she has never worked because of her dual role as a mother and full time student. This is her fifth year in the university. She was born in South City and continues to live there aswell.</p> <p>She played as a child in different geographic areas such as South City, Austin, and Matamoros (Transnational). She shared that the context in</p>

	<p>which play took place changed what she played and with whom she played. She also shared that as a child she enjoyed social play outdoors. Although playing has become challenging due to her responsibilities as a mother, student and wife, she says that she tries to make an effort to find time to play with her children, and continues to enjoy playing outdoors, jumping on the trampoline and playing with groups of people like when she played as a child. The participant stated that she is now much more preoccupied with getting hurt, since she is now a mother with responsibilities.</p>
<p>Participant 3</p>	<p>Participant 3 described herself as a 24-year old Hispanic Female, who is married and has a son that is 2 years old. She tries to spend time and to play with her son but, due to being a full-time student, and the demands of being a wife and a mother, she finds little time to play with her son or for her own pleasure. However, she did explain that because she understands how important play is, she makes sure that her son plays whether it is with his grandparents or his father while she is at the university. She spoke about her play as a child which was always outdoors with her neighbors and friends. She spoke about how she enjoyed playing with her neighbors during “mud parties” and also, her play in Matamoros, Mexico and how the play in Mexico was different from the play in South City, in the United States.</p>
<p>Participant 4</p>	<p>Participant 4, is 20 years old, she is a junior at the university and is seeking a degree in Special education. She works at the student house services and is president of her sorority. She is the secretary of the Greek Council. She</p>

	<p>is very involved in the university and still lives at home with her mother. She is really focused on trying to graduate. She spoke about playing with her cousins as a child and how many times she played on her own with her dolls and her cat when there was no one else to play with. She also spoke about having to complete chores prior to play-time. Today as an adult, she still lives at home with her mom and struggles to find time to play. She explained that the last time that she played with children was during her community work at the Children’s Museum in South city and while babysitting for a friend.</p>
<p>Participant 5</p>	<p>Participant 5 is 42 years old. She is married with four children. She is seeking a degree in EC-6th and EC-12th Special Education. She has two sons and is also married. As a child she grew up in Mexico and played with her siblings, neighbors and friends. As an adult she continues to play. She shared that every Friday; she plays cards with her family.</p>
<p>Participant 6</p>	<p>She is 24 and is seeking a degree in EC-6 as a Bilingual Generalist. She says that she would like to work in a kinder classroom. From the time she was a very young age she knew that she wanted to be a teacher because of the positive relationships that she formed with her own teachers. During the interview she identified herself as a Christian and stated that she has worked with a youth group since 2006 and today she is the teacher coordinator of the youth group in her church. She grew up in a ranch in Tamaulipas, Mexico, with no electricity, no portable water, and little technology. However, she says that growing up in this area allowed her to</p>

Participant	<p>play freely with whatever she found including <i>tablas</i> (wooden boards). For example, as a child she played with the neighborhood kids and she pretended to be a teacher. She also stated that she and her friends enjoyed pretend play by playing <i>a la Telenovela</i> (soap opera).</p>
7	<p>She is 33 years old and has two daughters and a son who is a toddler.</p> <p>Participant 7 was born in Houston, Texas and was raised in Monterrey, Mexico, and then moved back to South City at 13 and today she continues to reside in South City. She shared that this change was very difficult for her because her formative years were in Mexico and teachers in South City were not very sensitive about her being an English Language Learner. She claimed that some of her teachers were racist and mean to her. She explained that she was not able to participate in sports or extra curricular activities because of the lack of support for her needs as an ELL. She also shared that she is divorced from her first husband, and happily married to her high school sweetheart. Participant 7 works as a teacher aid in an elementary public school in South City. Her responsibilities (as a floater) include working with different children including those with special needs. She says that she is kind and playful with her students and that she teaches them through the use of games and songs. Participant 7 claimed that she is often looked down at or questioned by other faculty members who do not seem to agree with her playful attitude. At home, she is a mother of 3 and she says that she makes an effort to play with her children every day by taking them to a local park and the zoo, both in South City. As a child,</p>

	<p>participant 1 played both in Mexico and in the U.S. She says that she enjoyed playing with the mud, and “rough play” which included climbing and jumping off of trees and two-story houses. She said that she has only five more classes to complete in order to graduate as a teacher. She also shared that although she initially sought a degree in International Business, she later decided that teaching was her passion and so she is currently seeking her teaching degree.</p>
<p>Participant 8</p>	<p>She is the 6th of 7 children. She moved from Mexico to South City when she was 10. She was entering the 3rd grade. She is married and has three children. She has a 23- year old and has other children in college. She has been working as a paraprofessional for 13 years. She expressed that she loves working with children with special needs because they are her inspiration. She believes that play is definitely fun but that it is also very educational if you know how to use it. Although her children are grown, she integrates play into her daily life by playing with her nieces and nephews and her students at a public High School in a Special Education unit.</p>
<p>Participant 9</p>	<p>Participant 9 identified herself as single, with no kids, and she still lives with her mother. Although she is not currently working, she explained that she spends a great deal of time driving from McAllen to South City, and back every day because of school. She shared many details about how she used to work at T-Mobile and after the company closed in this area, she was awarded scholarship money in order to continue her education. She</p>

	<p>spoke about her challenges to play as a child because she did not feel safe outside in the sun, grass, and dirt. She said that she did not play very much as a child because of her fears and when she did play, her play was typically indoors with her brothers. She spoke about how she was afraid of participating in the Mud Day due to her fears of insects, the grass, and the mud. She described herself as very “limited” and “boring” due to these fears. However, she has two nephews and after taking this course she has become knowledgeable about how important play is and consequently, she now makes an effort to create play opportunities for her nephews when they visit her home. Participant 9 claims that she even plays outdoors with her nephews despite her fears.</p>
<p>Participant 10</p>	<p>She is the oldest of three siblings (all female). She described herself as patient, and she shared that she likes children. She spoke about how she tries to be very positive by enjoying every day to the fullest. She is a senior and will be done with her teaching degree soon. She has two teenagers, ages 13 and 14. She shared that she is trying to be a role model for her children. During the interview she expressed that when her children grow up, she would like for them to seek a career that they will enjoy. She likes to be active in helping her community. For example, she volunteers in helping her professors, the teachers during observations, and so forth. She spoke about her niece who spends a great amount of time with her while her sister works. She expressed that she enjoys playing with her niece in different ways such as with board games and even cooking, and coloring.</p>

She also talked about how she likes to read to children, including her niece.

She explained that she tries to integrate emotion into her oral reading in order to make the read aloud fun. In regards to her childhood, she related that she spent all of her childhood in Matamoros, Mexico. As a child she used to enjoy playing house, she liked to pretend to be the “mommy” and she liked to play with dolls, using little dishes and a dollhouse, which was built by her father. She remembers that this house was white with pink trim. It had a kitchen and even had furniture. She shared that each Christmas she would collect new items for this playhouse. As a child she would play with her cousins and neighbors. She talked about how they would pretend and role-play while playing “restaurant” in Matamoros. She would also play “doctor’s office” by pretending to be the doctor. She also shared that she liked to pretend to be the “teacher” as a child. Additionally, she spoke about her collection of Barbie dolls. Participant 10 also shared that they would get the towels and sheets that were on the clothes line and use them as little houses.

At the age of 15, she moved to South City. Even though she enjoyed playing basketball and dancing, she did not have the opportunity to participate in these extra curricular activities because she had to go travel to Mexico every weekend because her parents continued to live and work in Matamoros, Mexico. While her parents lived and worked in Mexico, she would live in South City to attend high school and her mother would have to travel every day to South City to be with her and her sisters. Every

weekend she would cross the border to Mexico to spend time with her parents and on Mondays, she returned to school.

At 16 she began working at Chick-fil-A and was employed there for four years. As an adult, her play has changed, she now enjoys going to the movies and going out with friends, and being playful with her nieces and with the children from the different schools where she volunteers.

Data Collection and Procedures

The data for this study was collected between the spring and fall semesters of 2014 (April 17th-September 27th) after I received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Correspondingly, I made two contact visits to personally invite all students enrolled in two sections of a teacher education course that integrates different opportunities to learn about children's play, such as participating in a service learning community play day.

In line with the purpose of this study, I used interview methods to collect data. In this light, as recommended by Seidman (2013), "Building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study" (p. 50). In order to recruit participants, I first spoke with the Early Childhood Coordinator of the College of Education, to request assistance in the recruitment of participants for the study. As such, Professor Dubai served as a gatekeeper in this research study (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Professor Dubai allowed me to visit her classroom and personally invite teacher candidates enrolled in two

sections of a teacher preparation course, *The Environment and Early Childhood Education*, to participate in this research.

Several steps were taken in order to recruit participants for this research. For example, I included an invitation letter and a letter of consent for prospective candidates to review. Importantly, the participants who chose to participate agreed to sign a consent form. Additionally, I made sure that participants included the best times, places, dates and contact information on their invitation packets to facilitate the scheduling of the face-to-face interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013). For this study, data were collected in a range of settings (university classrooms, two community play days) over time, using a variety of methods as recommended by Marshall & Rossman (2016).

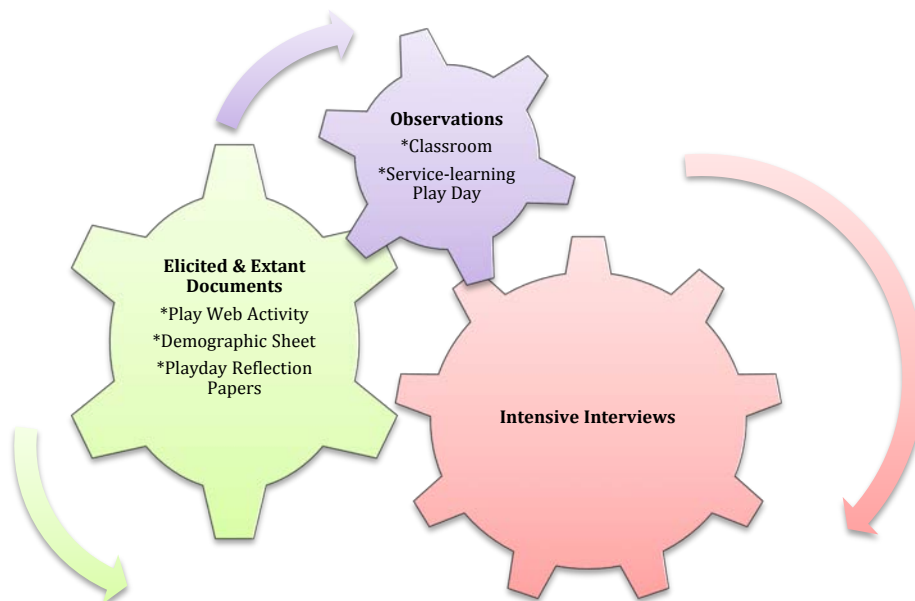
Based on the principles of grounded theory methods, during the focused coding phase (Charmaz, 2014) two more participants were recruited from the same course taught by the same professor. However, these participants were recruited during the end of the Summer I semester, following the field observation of the first community play day. Table 3.4 below depicts the data gathering time line as well as the data collection method utilized for this study.

Table 3.4: Data Gathering Time Line

<i>Data Gathering Time Line</i>	<i>Data Collection Method</i>
April 17th	Classroom Observation
April 29th	Classroom Observation
April 22, 2014	Began Conducting Interviews
April 22, 2014	Began Collecting Play Webs
April 22, 2014	Began Collecting Demographic Sheets
June 28 th 2014	Play Day Observation (Mud Day)
July 14 th 2014	Recruited Two More Participants During Summer I (Theoretical Sampling)

As the researcher of this study, I employed multiple forms of data collection that comprise traditional sources of data in a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The three data sources for this study were: interviews, observations, and documents as illustrated in Figure 3.1 below (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). A detailed explanation for the data collection process of each is rendered in the sections that follow.

Figure 3.1: Data Sources



Observations

Classroom Observations. From its preliminary phase of data collection, I conducted observations. The beginning point of the data collection process was direct observation of the teacher candidates in their university classroom. Observing participants first-hand, was a fruitful first step in the research process of this study for several reasons. As recommended by Patton, (2002), observations are a useful tool in collecting data because they allow the researcher to record behavior and actions as they are happening. Before entering the setting and during the

observations, I kept the following questions in mind, “What do I notice?” and “What’s happening here?” (Glaser, 1978). As proposed by Charmaz (2014), “...these types of questions get you started” and mentally prepare the researcher to see what people actually do within a particular context (p. 34). In essence, keeping these types of questions in mind was a helpful resource because it provided me with some connective tissue for observing and making sense of what was transpiring in the data.

I conducted two classroom observations of approximately three hours each during the spring semester of 2014. Specifically, the first observation took place on April 17th, 2014 and the second observation occurred on April 29th at the university. As previously mentioned, the observations occurred at the end of the spring semester. In this study, I was a non - participant observer who observed students in their natural school setting and listened to the discussions that evolved between teacher candidates and their professor. Field notes were taken during the observations. However, I did not conduct any observations of the participants who were recruited during the summer semester.

Observations in Play Day 1, Mud Play Day. As data emerged from classroom observations and then from the participant interviews (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), and tentative analytic categories became available to use for further analysis, through theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978), I decided that there were areas that warranted further investigation (details of analysis are presented in the data analysis section). Consequently, I chose to conduct a field observation during a service learning community play day.

The purpose of this community play day was to celebrate International Mud Day, by learning about sustainability, recycling, and creative and free play with the use of diverse materials. International Mud Day is globally celebrated on June 29th and the rationale for having

a mud day is to “...grow awareness and honor the goodness of life experience when children connect with nature” (World Forum Foundation, 2015).

Correspondingly, the event took place on June 28, 2014 at Los Frescos Flea Market where a mud pit was used for children to explore and play with mud. This was the first celebration of International Mud Day in all of Texas according to Dr. Dubai (personal communication, June 28, 2014). This event was free to the community and was promoted widely by Dr. Dubai and her students, through local press, social media, and promotional flyers, with the intent of advocating for children’s play rights. The observation lasted an hour and a half and I was an active participant in the play day. Importantly, not only did I observe the physical setting, behaviors, actions, conversations, and interactions of other community members, teacher candidates, the professor, and my own four children, but I also played during the community play day event. Field notes were not collected during the event. However, field notes about what I observed and experienced, were written after the play day (Merriam, 2009).

Observations in Play Day 2, Cardboard Box Play Day. A second play day observation took place on September 27, 2014 within the outdoor spaces of South City University. This observation happened after all ten participants had been interviewed and data unveiled that the experience of participating in these “community play days” were a critical component in shaping participants’ educational beliefs about the value of children’s play.

Like the previous play day, the second play day was a free community event organized by Dr. Dubai and her students. Inspired by the Cardboard Challenge global celebration, conceived by the Imagination Foundation, the purpose was to invite the community to play with anything that they could imagine.

As previously explained, part of the course requirements was that teacher candidates were expected to plan, organize and participate in a community play day with the intention of facilitating children's learning, creativity and imagination. This was accomplished by creating open-ended activities with cardboard boxes, which led children to engage in divergent activities that were planned to promote active problem solving, mediation and cross-cultural communication. As such, the concept of peace was fostered through diverse choices, collaboration, and social negotiations, which included the sharing of materials and ideas, while engaged in play. Fundamentally, the purpose of this play day was also to advocate for children's rights to play while fostering peace and creative opportunities. Methodologically, this observation was also conducted as a method of comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with previous data. In addition the data that emerged from this observation, served as confirmation for established categories.

Field notes. In this study, I took field notes as primary data. Writing these field notes during the observation (class observation) or immediately after the observation (play days) was a helpful method of keeping ideas fresh and not letting go of any salient observations or ideas. These notes were written in an informal and open-ended manner as "jottings" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 19) and served to represent what happened during the time that participants were in class and during the two play days that were observed (Angrosino, 2007). Field notes for this study included recordings of the setting, what people said, how they behaved, the actions that took place, and the social interactions that transpired during these social moments (Merriam, 2009). Writing these field notes was an active process that required interpretation and sense making from me as the researcher (Emerson et al., 1995). Table 3.4 below denotes an example of the field notes that resulted from the first play day that I observed during the study.

Table 3.5: Mud Play Day

<p>Date: June 28th 2014 Location: Los Frescos ⁹ Flea Market Time & Duration: Noon, 1.5 hours.</p>	<p>Observer's Comments</p> <p>“What did happen?”</p> <p>Children seemed to be having fun</p>
<p>Open outdoor space behind a flea market where the community goes to buy all types of used and new goods (e.g., food, clothes articles, toys, tools, plants, and electronics). Children of different ages played in the community play day. They jumped, ran, got dirty, got messy, seemed to have fun and made all types of mud sculptures. Present were teacher candidates, parents, professor and children of different ages (approximately ranging in ages from 2 -16). Children spoke in both English and Spanish during the event and also used “code-switching¹⁰” or translanguaging.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They played freely without any restrictions • Played together with other children of different ages • Cooperation • Social Play • Different types of play were observed • They smiled, laughed, talked • Children were actively engaged • Children created all type of play sculptures with the mud • They got very messy <p>“What did not happen?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children were not bored • Children did not fight • Children did not misbehave • Children were not mean or rude to others

⁹ Fictitious name used to protect the identity of the establishment.

¹⁰ Code-switching is a bilingual-mode activity in which more than one language, typically speakers’ native language and second language (L2), are used intrasententially or intersententially (Cook, 2001).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No interruptions• No need to reprimand
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Interviews

Given the purpose of this study, I conducted intensive interviewing as a primary method of data collection. According to Van Manen (1990) interviewing is an appropriate technique for collecting rich information in the form of the participant's actual language about experiences that have already occurred to them and that cannot be directly observed because they only exist in the participant's minds. As Patton (2002) reminds us:

“We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. The issue is not whether observational data is more desirable, valid, or meaningful than self-report data. The fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things” (pp. 455-456).

In essence, this method allowed me to gather “self reports” which are considered valid in qualitative research given that participants' words can be representative of their

reality (Van Manen, 1990). As affirmed by Hatch (2002), “The strength of interviews is that they allow insight into participants perspectives” (p. 97).

For this study, as initially stated, intensive interviewing methods were utilized to explore participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Intensive interviewing fit well with constructivist grounded theory methods because it facilitates “analytic control” for the researcher in the iterative process of collecting and analyzing data about what participants have to say about the phenomenon in question (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). As stated by Charmaz (2014), “Both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted”(p. 85). From this perspective, this method of interviewing was appropriate in this study. Specifically, it was suitable because of the flexibility it afforded me as the researcher, in creating open-ended questions for interviewing participants about their beliefs about the value of play. Given that beliefs are based on lived experiences, this type of interviewing allowed me as the researcher to be responsive to what participants wanted to share about themselves during the interview (Kvale, 1996).

It was especially significant for me that the interviews would be more like a guided conversation, or what Dexter (1970) terms as a “conversation with purpose” (p. 136). During the interview, participants were allowed to expand on their responses and I carefully asked further questions based on the respondents’ answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In line with this study’s epistemological underpinnings, the use of open-ended questions allowed for the participants and I to co-construct the final interviews. Essentially, in qualitative research, it is a “delicate dance” between the researcher and the participant that shapes the story of what is happening with the data (Jewett, 2008).

Prior to the interviews, I developed an interview guide with open-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions was useful because it allowed for the possibility for immediate follow-up on ideas as the interview unfolded between I, as the researcher and the interviewee. The interview guide used was the same for all participants, yet questions were changed or added depending on the dynamics of the interview. Moreover, as recommended by Marshall & Rossman (2016), the interview questions were reviewed by several professors, prior to any of the interviews with participants taking place. Given the emergent nature of this study, individual prompts were used as needed to assist the participants in expanding their response and essentially, helping me to get a clear picture of participants' beliefs about the value of play. Additional questions were asked based on the direction of each individual interview.

Importantly, the interview guide (see Appendix D) included questions that drew on the literature surveyed for this study with the purpose of answering this study's research questions about teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play in learning and development and also, what shaped these beliefs. Originally, I planned to take notes while the interviews took place but during the first interview, I decided not to do so, given that it seemed to distract the interviewee. Each of the participants was only interviewed once. Interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours approximately. Given that the space or location where interviews take place is significant in qualitative inquiry as argued by King and Horrocks (2010), the interviews took place in different locations in the community and were individually selected by each of the ten different participants (see Table 3.2). Interviews were face to face and they were audio recorded with a Samsung cell phone.

Participants were first given a demographic sheet to complete prior to interview (see Appendix C). Importantly, I first spent a few minutes building rapport with each of the

participants. Then I spent a few minutes going over the procedure for the interview. Next, I asked participants to complete a play web about what came to their mind when they heard the word “play” (See appendix G). Immediately thereafter, using an interview guide, I conducted the interview. Memos were created after each of the interviews (more as initial notes and thoughts).

Documents

In an attempt to answer the research questions that guided this study, I analyzed different documents. Charmaz (2014) claims that documents are useful in qualitative research because, “People create documents for specific purposes and they do so within social, economic, historical, cultural, and situational contexts” (p.46). Specifically, elicited and extant documents were reviewed as supplementary sources of data (Charmaz, 2014).

Elicited Documents. According to Charmaz (2014) “Elicited documents involve research participants in producing the data” (p. 47). Two forms of elicited documents were analyzed for this study. The first was an initial demographic sheet and the second, was a play web activity, and both were completed prior to the participant’s first interview (see appendices C and G). The purpose of the demographic sheet was to gather background information about each of the participants such as: age, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. Moreover, the purpose of the web activity was to get an initial response about Hispanic teacher candidates’ beliefs about play and also, to get the respondents thinking about play. My intention as the researcher of this study was to provoke participants to dig into their mental play schemas (Piaget, 1951/1962).

Extant Documents. With extant documents, the researcher is not active in the creative process of these texts. With this said, in order to gain a more holistic picture, newspaper articles (community play day), the university’s web site and course syllabus were used to support

observational and interview findings (Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2016; Charmaz, 2014). As the study unfolded, I also collected reflective papers from participants in this study (these were produced after their participation in a community play day and were a required component of the teacher preparation course in which they were enrolled). As stated by Marshall and Rossman (2016) "...the analysis of documents is potentially quite rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting" (p. 164). Collectively, I used both elicited and extant documents to support observational and interview findings for this present research.

Data Transformation and Analysis

The underlying logic of a qualitative study with constructivist grounded theory methods is exploratory, inductive and emergent and thus, for the entire process of this study, I had to make constant decisions (Glesne, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2015). In this light, analysis in constructivist grounded theory can be seen as a process of data transformation through diverse analytic procedures in an effort to make meaning of raw data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). In much qualitative research, the data collection and analysis happen concurrently and is an ongoing, iterative process that requires the ability to question, and to have creativity which develops as the researcher makes sense of the emergent data (Saldaña, 2015). In other words, there is no separation between the data collection and the data analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Correspondingly, in this study, I collected and analyzed data concurrently.

In order to raise the analytical level of this study, different levels of analysis were used with the aim of answering the research questions that guided this research (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009). As Merriam (2009) reminds us, "...the practical goal of data analysis is to find answers to your research questions" (p.176). Similarly, for Glesne (2016) "...qualitative

researchers code to discern themes, patterns, and processes; to make comparisons; and to build theoretical explanations” which answer the questions sought in a study (p. 195).

Fundamentally, my goal in constructing these different levels of analysis was to produce a coherent analysis of the teacher candidates’ interviews, observations, and documents, and to ground the analysis in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Based on the logic of constructivist grounded theory methods, in this study, as in the case of many grounded theory studies (e.g., Doig, McLennan, & Urichuk, 2009; Teti, Bowleg, & Lloyd, 2010; Tweed & Salter, 2000), these levels did not occur in a neat and sequential order (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2008). As Birks and Mills (2015) remind us, “As an iterative process, grounded theory progresses in response to the evolving data collection and analysis” (p.22). Similarly, for Charmaz (2008) “The inductive, iterative process of going back and forth between data collection and analysis makes emergent grounded theory analyses focused and incisive”(p.168).

Accordingly, by drawing on Charmaz’s (2008; 2014), Birks and Mills (2015) and others’ work, for this study, the analysis was an iterative process of creatively playing with the data, by reading, writing, organizing, managing, coding, reflecting, memoing, comparing, categorizing, describing, analyzing, and interpreting data until all categories were fully developed (Saldaña, 2015). Basically, as stated by Charmaz (2014), “We play with the ideas we gain from the data. We become involved with our data and learn from them” (p. 136)

In essence, the goal of data analysis in qualitative research is to answer the research questions that guide the study. As Merriam (2009) explains, “The overall process of data analysis begins by identifying segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions. This segment is a unit of data which is a potential answer or part of an answer to the question(s)

you have asked in this study” (177). In sum, the steps taken to analyze data for this study are rendered in the sections that follow.

Transcribing Transcripts

A transcription of an interview raises the level of analysis and renders rich data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Flick, 2015; Merriam, 2009). As such, I transcribed the interviews for this study. Because most of the interviews ranged between 35 minutes to approximately two hours and-a-half, I first listened to the entire interview and then created jottings or notes (memos) after each interview (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). In actual fact, writing these memos (as it is later explained in detail) was significant in this study. As such, I concur with Charmaz (2014) and Wolcott (2009), in that writing was an essential tool of analysis in the transcription process and throughout this study.

The words spoken by each of the participants were captured verbatim to ensure extensive rich data (Merriam, 2009). Transcribing each interview was an ongoing opportunity for analysis as I listened many times to the audio of the interview and typed the respondents’ words.

Transcribing helped me to become familiar with the content because it required listening to each word carefully. The process of transcribing the interviews also provided a mental space for me to ask questions about the data collected (Bird, 2005). As Charmaz (2006) reminds us, the researcher should ask, “What do the data suggest? Pronounce? *Assume?*” (p. 47).

Transcripts were printed and different colored markers and pens were used to code the data by hand. As I played with the data, I found that working on paper allowed me the kind of creativity and flexibility that is important in the early phases of analysis and this method was also helpful as the study progressed.

Several steps were taken to analyze the transcripts from the interviews. During the transcription process, I engaged in analysis by listening to each interview several times, and eventually, by coding meaningful segments of data with other fragments of data within each interview transcript through the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) until categories began to emerge. These emergent categories were then compared across interviews and organized into themes. A detailed explanation of the coding process used for this study is explained in the sections that follow.

Initial Coding and Focused Coding

In keeping with grounded theory methods, and as initially proposed in Glaser (1978) and Glaser and Strauss (1967), at the outset, I conducted initial or open coding of the transcripts. This analytic process involved coding words, segments, lines and paragraphs. Moreover, the data were coded for processes, actions and meanings (Charmaz, 2012). In analyzing data, I coded according to the purpose of the study and with the goal of answering the research questions that guided this research (Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2007; Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2015). In explaining open coding, Merriam (2009) reminds us that this idea simply means that “you are being open to anything possible at this point...” (p. 178). For me as the researcher, this was a significant step in the analysis process, because it was an opportunity to play with the data in order to construct codes that had potential analytic value (Charmaz, 2014, p.137).

As Merriam (2009) reminds us, open coding is like “...having a conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making comments to it and so on” (p. 178). According to Merriam, for Lincoln & Guba (1985), a unit or a code, must meet two criteria:(1) it should be heuristic-that is, it should reveal information relevant to the study and stimulate the reader to think beyond the particular bit of information, (2) the unit should be “...the smallest piece of information about

something that can stand by itself-that is, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 345, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 177). In the same vein, for Saldaña, (2013), a code or unit of meaning “...is a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute to a portion of language-based or visual data”(p.3). Similarly, Miles et al., (2014) refer to a code as “...labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually attached to data “chunks” of varying sizes and can take the form of a straightforward, descriptive label of a more evocative and complex one” (p. 72). For Glesne (2016), “Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data...” (p. 195).

Careful reading and re-reading of the text was a critical step in the construction of the codes that emerged during this study (Charmaz, 2014). Methodologically speaking, from a constructivist standpoint, for this research study, the construction of codes was driven by my theoretical sensitivity which is essentially fueled by my lived experiences (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2008; 2014) . According to Birks & Mills (2015), theoretical sensitivity is described as “...the ability to recognize and extract from the data elements that have relevance for your emerging theory” (p. 58). Additionally, Birks & Mills (2015) remind us, for Strauss & Corbin (1990), theoretical sensitivity is “the researcher’s insight into what is meaningful” in that data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 as cited in Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 58). Furthermore, Birks and Mills (2015) state that theoretical sensitivity has three important characteristics (p.58):

1. It reflects the sum of your personal, professional, and experiential history;
2. It can be enhanced by various techniques, tools and strategies;
3. It increases as your research progresses.

In hindsight, theoretical sensitivity (Charmaz, 2014) was a significant step for me throughout the data analysis process (Birks & Mills, 2015). During this process of analysis and coding for units of meaning (Gibbs, 2007), I kept the following questions in mind as recommended by Charmaz (2003):

1. What is going on?
2. What are people doing?
3. What is the person saying?
4. What do these actions and statements take for granted?
5. How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements?(pp. 94-95).

Clearly, the purpose of this open coding step is to remain continually aware (Saldaña, 2015) to any analytical possibility and to explore data as it evolves through constant questioning (Charmaz, 2014). Importantly, this process of analysis helped me in making sense of the data and more importantly, to see the "... familiar in new light" (Charmaz, 2014, p.133). Essentially, this initial coding or "open coding" provided me with direction and with a preliminary set of ideas as to what to explore and examine analytically (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glesne, 2016).

In regards to coding, Charmaz (2014) recommends the following:

- Remain open
- Stay close to the data
- Keep your codes simple and precise

- Construct short codes
- Preserve actions
- Compare data with data
- Move quickly through the data (p. 120)

In keeping with constructivist grounded theory methods, I stayed away from descriptive renderings and focused on raising the methodical level by constructing analytical rather than descriptive codes (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). Most importantly, from a constructivist stance, each of the codes was produced through my interaction with the data of this study (Birks & Mill, 2014; Charmaz, 2014).

Charmaz (2012, 2014) recommends to code in gerunds to facilitate an analytical handle on the data. As Charmaz (2012) reminds us, “I also advise researchers to code in gerunds, the noun forms of verbs, to the extent possible. Gerunds build action right into the codes. Hence, coding in gerunds allows us to see processes that otherwise might remain invisible”(p. 5). In this light, during initial coding, I coded data pieces that denoted actions with codes like “Playing with friends” or “ Playing outdoors”. According to Glaser (1978) and Charmaz (2012; 2014), coding with gerunds helps in the process of looking at the data analytically. In keeping with grounded theory, coding gerunds allowed me to code for actions, process, and meanings, as opposed to earlier codes (which were more descriptive).

Ultimately, these type of codes helped me to make analytic sense of emerging ideas in order to capture participants’ beliefs about play (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014, Glesne, 2016; Saldaña, 2014). Codes developed during this initial phase were tentative and evolved as the study unfolded (Saldaña, 2013). However, by engaging in initial coding, I stayed grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and was able to identify salient concepts that could have

been missed (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). In retrospect, initial coding was an important part of the analysis process for me as the researcher, because it gave me analytic direction. As Charmaz (2014) states, initial coding “...routes your work in an analytic direction while you are in the early stages of research” and it allows you to raise questions about what your data is saying (p. 36). Additionally, Charmaz (2014) recommends that you ask yourself, “what kinds of theoretical categories do these codes indicate?”(p. 144). As such, as I coded the first participant’s interview transcript, several initial codes emerged, and indicated promising leads such as the importance of the experience with the phenomenon in question, in this case “play”. Consequently, the initial codes that resulted from the first interview were very important because they provided me with valuable material to think about and to question. Table 3.4 below provides an example of initial/open coding with teacher candidate number one.

Table 3.6: Initial/Open Coding

Interview questions and participant’s statements	Initial code (Action)
<p><i>Researcher:</i> So you especially enjoyed soccer, and playing with bugs, anything else?</p> <p><i>Participant:</i> Anything that had to do with outdoors.</p>	<p>Experiencing play in childhood</p>

Focused coding was the next level of analysis that I utilized with the aim of answering the research questions. This method of coding resulted from constantly contrasting and

comparing data with data (initial codes with initial codes) until it is refined (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2013). As stated by Charmaz (2014), “In focused coding, you work with initial codes that indicate analytic significance” (p. 19). Principally, I looked for patterns of actions or content that occurred at least more than twice (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2015). The idea in focused coding is to look for patterns with more repetitions, because as Saldaña (2015) points out, “The more repetitions, the more stable the pattern” (p.29). Some of the questions that guided the process of focused coding were, “what is repetitive” “what is salient” “what is regularly occurring?” in essence, what is the data revealing? (Gibbs, 2007; Saldaña, 2015).

In the process of constructing codes I kept the following recommendations in mind:

1. What do you find when you compare your initial codes with data?
2. In which ways might your initial codes reveal patterns?
3. Which of these codes best account for the data?
4. Have you raised these codes to focused codes?
5. What do your comparisons between codes indicate?
6. Do your focused codes reveal gaps in the data? (Charmaz, 2014, pp.141).

Two initial codes that resulted from the first interview with participant one were “Experiencing play” and the other initial code was “Valuing play.” Although participant one did not specifically state these phrases verbatim, these renderings are implied repeatedly through his interview responses. Consequently, I tested these codes by applying the constant comparison method with each of the subsequent nine interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I identified “Valuing play” as an initial code, which graduated into a focused code, and then finally graduated into the concept of “Valuing play”. What became very clear about open coding

and focused coding is that true to the nature of qualitative research, focused coding is an emergent process that did not occur in a linear fashion as evidenced in the previous paragraph. In some cases, open coding and focused coding happened concurrently. Key in the methodical process of this research was my active involvement with the data, which included developing theoretical sensitivity. Importantly, this was a crucial analytic skill that in hindsight, allowed me to bring “analytic precision” to my work (Charmaz, 2014).

During this study, reading and re-reading of the data allowed for refinements in interpretations and understandings of the emerging categories. This process was necessary in order to construct salient categories that would answer the research questions that guided this study. Because interview transcripts yielded the richest data, then the data from observations and documents were used to verify data accuracy and to identify relevant connections amongst the three sources of data (Charmaz, 2014). Again, part of this process was to sort and categorize focused codes by clustering them to identify salient relationships amongst the data in order to answer the research questions that guided this study (Charmaz, 2014). Significantly, categories were then compared across interviews. From this process, these categories were then organized into themes that were aligned to the corresponding research questions.

Memo Writing

As a critical process utilized in constructivist theory methods, I engaged in writing analytical memos about emerging codes, categories, themes and concepts throughout this study. For me, memo writing was a fundamental methodical process used in this study because it served as a useful analytical tool, as I gained “analytic grasp of the data” and simultaneously evolved with the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4). As it was mentioned earlier, there were two forms of memos for this study. Mainly, I organized these memos into initial memos and also analytical memos.

Because the process of transcription is time consuming, I made the decision to write these (memos) after each of the ten interviews when ideas about what respondents said during the interview were still fresh in my mind. In this study “memoing” was a significant analytical process during data collection and analysis. As stated by Charmaz (2014) “Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Memo writing creates an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas and hunches” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). In keeping with grounded theory procedures, I wrote memos throughout the duration of the study, which allowed me to stay focused and engaged with the data as it emerged. Memo writing was helpful in offering me opportunities to think about data in diverse ways and to ask questions about what seemed to be emerging throughout the study (Glaser, 1978; Glesne, 2016). Because memos were used to illustrate what I was thinking as I engaged with the data, the interpretation process that is documented through these notes is a strategic and systematic form of analysis (Glaser, 1978; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

During this study, through the process of constantly comparing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences, new ideas for a new code or category emerged and a memo was created. Initially, some memos were simple and more descriptive in nature and seemed to lack analytical direction. However, as the study proceeded, and I became more knowledgeable in qualitative analysis and constructivist grounded theory approaches, and at the same time more attentive and playful with my data (Charmaz, 2014), my memo writing became more analytical and in many cases, this involved different forms of concept mapping and diagramming (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Through constant comparison of

the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), memos were titled with the names of possible concepts or categories as proposed by Corbin & Strauss (2015).

Key in this study is that memos were created for reflection and interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As proposed by Glaser & Strauss, (1967) it is important to organize data into primary data (raw data) and the researcher's interpretation of the data. For all intents and purposes, this process of "memoing" helped me with the construction of codes and subsequent categories and concepts as I engaged in constant comparison of the emerging data (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In retrospect, memos were instrumental in helping me to create a story line of the story that was unfolding about the data (this is rendered in chapter IV).

Memos assisted in answering questions about "what seems to be going on here?"(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.148). The following journal entry recounts what I wrote after the first interview and was completed before transcription occurred. Notes were initially written on a napkin, given that the information needed to be put on paper immediately, and a napkin is what was available at the time. As indicated below, Figure 3.1 shows an early memo entry that resulted from the first interview.

Figure 3.2: Early Memo: Playing Despite Challenges

Date: April 22, 2014

The participant comes from a large Hispanic family. Participant played as a child with brothers, sisters and nephews and now he plays as an adult. He says he plays every day! I'm surprised by his response. Wow, someone who actually plays every day, I did not expect that. He enjoys working out (lifts weights) and this is a form or type of play for him because it is fun for him and fun is an essential element in play for him. Participant opened up about his

special physical condition growing up and how his own “experience” has forced him to take action. The actions that he has taken are that he is currently a teacher candidate who is pursuing a degree in special education and he does not let his special need stop him from what he wants to do which is to play, have fun and make a difference for other kids who like him, face some type of challenge. I was touched by his story. He says he wants to make a difference and encourage kids who also have some type of special need. I was surprised that he opened up about his special need to me because I have just met him briefly during the recruitment when he signed the consent form. I feel that he trusted me enough to share this personal story with me. The participant was interested and seemed to be enjoying the conversation we just had. I feel that he trusted me and I feel that I obtained some useful information.

In brief, the examples presented above are examples that show how I adhered to grounded theory techniques. In the section that follows, I briefly talk about some of the procedures utilized to address trustworthiness and credibility during this present study.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

In order to address trustworthiness and credibility, I utilized different procedures in this present study. Firstly, triangulation was employed through the use of multiple sources of data in the form of interviews, observations and documents (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, I drew from different theories to analyze and interpret data and to produce findings for this research (Creswell, 2013). Rich descriptions of the setting and participants (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam, 2009) were also used to provide the reader with a descriptive rendering. For example, I included a profile of each participant and their voices are interwoven as direct quotes into the findings and discussion sections of chapters four and five. Additionally, I employed respondent validation

techniques during the interview when participants provided meaningful but partial responses. In order to develop a more complete explanation, I would repeat what was said to the participant. For instance, during the interview I would ask the interviewee, “If I understand correctly, you are saying that...? Then the respondent would agree, disagree, or clarify and add to what they had previously intended. Most importantly, this strategy was used during each of the face-to-face interviews as a method of confirmation. In all these ways, I kept with recommended qualitative methods to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

In this study, I took several steps to conduct the research in an ethical manner (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln, 2009). As Merriam (2009) reminds us, “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 209). With regard to ethics, during each step of the research process, as the researcher of this present study I engaged in ethical practices by following the guidelines that exist such as those provided by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2006). A critical step in keeping with ethical guidelines is to gain approval from an Institutional Review Board. In this case, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from South City University. During the recruitment process and as part of the consent form rendered to each participant, they were informed about the purpose of the study. Additionally, teacher candidates were informed that their participation in this present study was completely voluntary and that the findings would possibly be presented in future presentations and/or published (e.g., research journal articles, book chapters etc.) (Van Den Hoonaard & Van Den Hoonaard, 2013).

This information along with a detailed explanation of what their participation would entail was included in the informed consent form, which was reviewed and signed by each of the ten participants prior to data collection and analysis (Glesne, 2016; Lincoln, 2009).

To safeguard the identities of the university, the city in which this study took place, the participants, and the gatekeeper, I utilized pseudonyms as previously discussed (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, I archived interview transcripts as Microsoft Word Documents and stored all files on a password protected desktop, and a flash drive. All data was safely stored in my home office (Van Den Hoonaard & Van Den Hoonaard, 2013).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the methodology for this study. The chapter began by exposing my positionality, assumptions, and role in this study. Next, a rationale for using constructivist grounded theory methods is presented in the chapter. Information about the research setting is provided thereafter. This is followed by the sampling procedures and demographic evidence. A profile of each participant is also rendered as part of this chapter. Moreover, chapter three includes a detailed account of the data collection and analysis procedures that were undertaken during this present study. Furthermore, the chapter described the ethical steps that were followed in order to ensure confidentiality. The following chapter presents the key findings in the form of themes of the qualitative analysis for each of the questions that guided this research and then proposes "...an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience" grounded in the data of this present study (Birks & Mills, 2014; Charmaz, 2014, p. 4).

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings for this study by restating its purpose as well as the research questions that guided this qualitative inquiry. Next, I render a detailed account of the findings that emerged from the data. To frame the presentation of these findings, I draw from the complementary work of diverse scholars who believe that experience plays a central role in how people think (Dewey, 1938; Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). From an interpretive, social constructivist perspective, I conclude this chapter by proposing an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience grounded in the data of this present study (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this current study was to explore the beliefs of ten Hispanic teacher candidates who were enrolled in a teacher education program in the Rio Grande Valley. Specifically, the aim of this study was to investigate the participants' beliefs about the value of play and also, to understand what possibly influenced the construction of these beliefs. To find these answers, I developed five research questions and they are as follows: (1) What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play? Do they value play and if so, how and why? (2) What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitutes play? (3) What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development in early childhood education? (4) What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs

about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play? (5) What influenced teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play? How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about play? In the section that follows I present the conceptual framework constructed from the review of the literature to analyze and interpret the data that emerged during this study.

Conceptual Framework

To frame this study, I drew from the work of three scholars with congruent social constructivist views on the value of experience, which posit that learning cannot be separated from its social and historical context. This conceptual framework includes features of the seminal work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Dewey (1938) and Nespor (1987).

Although Vygotsky's (1986) work did not specifically address beliefs, several researchers (e.g., Manning & Payne, 1991; Samaras, 2002; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998) have used his theories to examine teacher candidates' understandings of teaching. More recently, Sherwood and Reifel (2010) also drew from Vygotsky's (1986) work to study pre-service teachers' beliefs about play. Sherwood and Reifel's research found that pre-service teachers build on their spontaneous knowledge about play to make meaning of their definition of play.

Specifically, for this study, I drew on Vygotsky's (1986) continuum for conceptual development, in which he argues about the existence of two types of dynamic forms, mainly, what he conceived as spontaneous and scientific concepts, which are mutually dependent and, "...constantly influence each other" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). According to Vygotsky (1986), spontaneous or everyday concepts develop within human culture and experiences outside of academic settings (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Van der Veer, 1994). In contrast, scientific concepts for Vygotsky (1986) are concepts that are acquired in educational settings through the

mediation and interaction with the environment and in communal activities (1960/1981) with others such as peers and teachers (Samaras, 2002). As Kozulin (2005) reminds us, the idea of scientific concepts, "...has its roots in specialized and operationalized educational instruction activity that imposes scientifically defined concepts..." (p. 108). Thus, Vygotsky (1986) believed that these experiences lead to conceptual development. Moreover, as previously stated, Vygotsky (1986) held that these two processes are interlinked. As Vygotsky (1986) reminds us:

"We believe that the two processes—the development of spontaneous and nonspontaneous concepts—are related and constantly influence each other. They are parts of a single process: the development of concept formation which is affected by varying external and internal conditions but is essentially a unitary process, not a conflict of antagonistic, mutually exclusive forms of thinking" (p. 157).

Fundamentally, what is explained in this quote, is that Vygotsky (1986) believed that the development of these concepts happen synergistically within a social cultural and historical context which mediates peoples' experience and possibly develops and frames humans' ways of thinking (Kozulin, 1989, 2005; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Essentially, Vygotsky (1986) believed in the value of the experiences afforded by formal education (Samaras, 2002). From this view, Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical approach was also used as a lens to underpin and interpret the findings for this study given that people live social lives and engage in social interactions with others, and these experiences are grounded in a particular social cultural context and time. As Vygotsky (1981) states:

"...The word social when applied to our subject has great significance. Above all, in the widest sense of the word, it means that everything that is cultural is social. Culture is the product of social life and human social activity. That is why

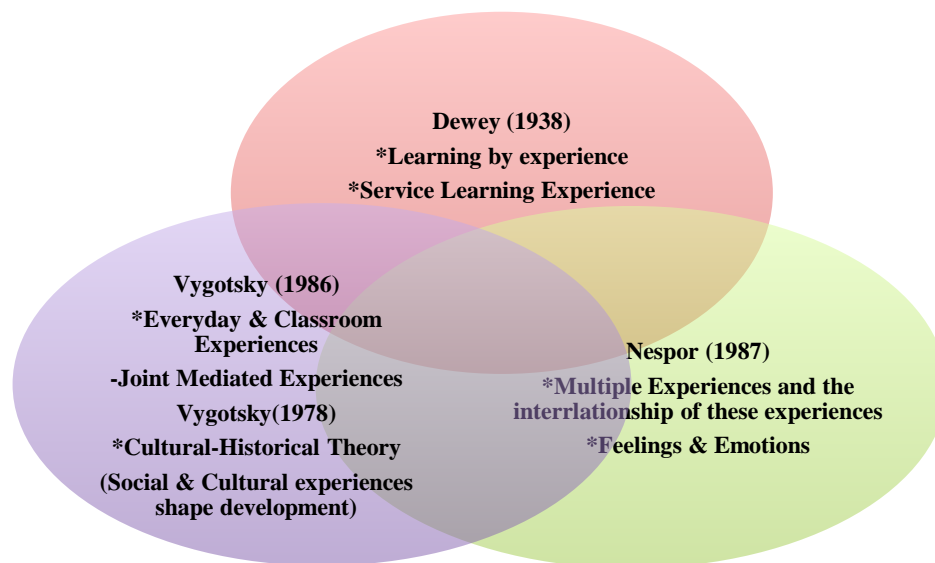
just by raising the question of the cultural development of behavior we are directly introducing the social plane of development” (p. 164).

Features of Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience and education were also central to framing the findings of this study, given that both personal and educational experiences seemed to have influenced participants’ beliefs about play. For Dewey (1938) the concepts of experience, citizenship, community and democracy were interrelated concepts that lead to valuable educative experiences that are necessary for further development. Moreover, Dewey (1938) reasoned that learning occurs through active participation in social community, which then leads to educative experiences as opposed to “...non-educative and mis-educative experience” (p.51). In this light, Dewey’s conceptualization of educative experiences that lead to further development was helpful in interpreting participants’ views about the value of play.

In his study, Nespor (1987) studied the beliefs of eight teachers and proposed a belief’s model that suggests that four influences shape beliefs: existential presumption (i.e., universal assumptions), alternativity (i.e., ideals), affective and evaluative loading (i.e., feelings and emotions), and episodic structure (i.e, episodes of personal experiences). Nespor (1987) proposed that these four influences work synergistically to shape teachers’ beliefs.

The conceptual framework I constructed to frame this research illustrates how the two overlapping features amongst all three theorists are that experience plays a fundamental role in how people think and in their beliefs and, it also illuminates that the development of these experiences cannot be separated from the social cultural and historical contexts (Dewey, 1938; Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework



Findings

In this study, I used multiple sources of data to ensure validity. Because teacher candidates' face-to-face interviews yielded the "richest data" they provided the foundation for data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The data I obtained from direct observations and from the documents collected were utilized to provide confirming evidence (Patton, 2002). As previously explained in chapter three, I made meaning of data through the iterative process of open coding and focused coding. Correspondingly, by using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) I sifted and sorted codes to construct categories, which I then re-organized into themes with the aim of answering the research questions that guided this investigation.

In this light, in the sections that follow I present the findings for this study in the form of themes. As evidence of the findings, within the presentation of each theme I interweave verbatim responses from participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Importantly, in analyzing the data qualitatively, I kept in mind what Bogdan & Biklen (2007) proposed:

“...your task is to convince the reader of the plausibility of your presentation.

Quoting our subjects and presenting short sections from the field notes and other data help convince the reader and help him or her get closer to the people you have studied” (p.206).

As the researcher of this study, my interpretive commentary about each finding is also interlaced in order to provide an accurate rendering of the logic that framed the findings for this qualitative research (Erickson, 1986; Wolcott, 2009). From this perspective, in his account of how interpretive commentary is considered essential in qualitative research, Erickson (1986) argues that:

“The interpretive commentary that precedes and follows an instance of particular description is necessary to guide the reader to see the analytic type of which the instance is a concrete token. Interpretive commentary thus points the reader to those details that are salient for the author, and to the meaning-interpretation of the author...” (p.152).

In the quote above, Erickson (1986) succinctly explains that bringing meaning to the data through “ interpretive commentary” is a hallmark of qualitative research and as such, it is one that I adhered to for the purpose of this research study (p. 152).

As formerly stated, this study was guided by five research questions and the subsequent sections present the findings related to these questions. The first four research questions are addressed in the first section titled, *Hispanic teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of children’s play*. Within this section, the following are discussed: (1) teacher candidates’ beliefs

about the value of play, (2) teacher candidates' beliefs of what constitutes play, (3) teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development, (4) teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play. In the second section titled, *Constructing teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play*, I present the findings about what appeared to have influenced teacher candidate's beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development and how these beliefs seemed to have been shaped.

Hispanic Teacher Candidates' Beliefs About the Value of Children's Play

Valuing Play

Based on the data collected and analyzed, I discovered that the participants in this study appeared to value play. As such, "valuing play" arose as a major concept that was constructed by several themes that emerged during data analysis. In the sections that follow I present these findings. Purposely, in what follows, I begin by discussing how participants' conceptualization of play supports this major finding.

Playing With a Conceptualization of Play

A review of the literature on play confirms that there are many complex definitions of play and also, that there are certain characteristics or behaviors that distinguish it as play (Huizinga, 1955; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1967, 1978). However, to date, no consensus has been reached on one universal definition of play (Eberle, 2014; Gordon, 2009; Gordon & Burghardt, 2015). From an educational perspective, this lack of consensus in defining play is certainly a challenge when it comes to preparing teacher candidates about seeing the value of children's play in learning and development (Johnson et al., 2005; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014).

In this present study, I asked the participants several questions in order to understand their conceptualization of what constitutes play. For example the following questions were asked during the interviews: “How would you define play?” “How would you describe play?” “What activities or behaviors come to mind when you think about play?” and “What is the key ingredient of play?” Interestingly, during the interviews participants played with their ideas about the meaning of play. What I want to suggest is that participants did not give a straightforward response but rather appeared to construct and re-construct their definition as they talked and attempted to make meaning of their conceptualization of the complex phenomenon that is play. Compellingly, each teacher candidate had a unique way of defining and understanding what constitutes play (Klugman & Fasioli, 1995) which predominantly consisted of multiple parts that were interrelated. Correspondingly, I propose that a significant theme that emerged from the data was “playing with a conceptualization of play” which was constructed by three categories: (1) playing is emotionally driven, (2) playing is active, and, (3) playing with what is not play. In what follows, respectively, I talk about each of these findings.

Playing is Emotionally Driven. When asked about their definition of play, participants seemed to have a positive reaction because they smiled often, and even giggled as they attempted to construct their definitions. Interestingly, teacher candidates’ definitions were interlaced with nostalgic memories of their childhood play (Nespor, 1987). Principally, it appeared that the participants drew from their memories as a reference point to construct a definition of play (Fleer, 2013). When asked to define play, participants began by defining play as “fun” as explained in detail in the sections that follow.

Playing is fun. Research confirms that human behavior is driven primarily through pleasure or pain (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). A characteristic of play that is often cited in the play

literature is its positive affect. As such, play is often considered to be joyful and fun by the player (Johnson et al., 2005; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). According to this view, play could be seen as an interpretive undertaking, given that play is chosen by the player because he or she typically considers it fun and enjoyable. As Panksepp and Biven (2012) remind us, “Playful activities, in their many forms, bring all young mammals great joy” (p. 351).

In this study, each of the participants spoke favorably about their childhood play as they gave examples about their engagement in play that they personally regarded as fun or joyful. In describing play, Johnson et al., (2005) tell us that, “Play is almost always enjoyable” and what is enjoyable can only be decided by the player who is engaged in his individual play (p. 13). In this light, evaluation of the data indicated that virtually every teacher candidate in this study believed that play can be defined as being fun.

For example, during the interview, participant one drew from his childhood experiences or what Vygotsky (1986) called “spontaneous thinking” and shared that he had a childhood filled with diverse play experiences. During our interview, he further discussed how he played with his cousins, siblings and nephews as a child, being that he comes from a large family of ten siblings. When asked to define play, or describe play, participant one drew from his prior play experiences (Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986) and stated the following:

“Well I mean I guess I’ll start right here, fun. When it’s fun it’s with family and friends. Just doing what you want to do. But then when you turn play into training or a work out, um it’s not so much fun anymore. It’s a goal you are trying to meet **//so you meet the goal through?** // Training, through play. You need to be active. And it needs teamwork; the teamwork needs to be social. I mean you can go on the web with a crazy web with play itself...” (TC#1)

This statement confirms that participant one believes that play needs to be fun. Yet, like each of the participants, the definition rendered consisted of multiple parts (Vygotsky, 1986). For example, as shown in his interview excerpt, as he continues to articulate his definition, he attempts to touch on the social aspect of play and then makes the connection to the web activity that he and other participants were asked to complete prior to the interview (see Appendix G). Making the connection to his web seemed to indicate that he was reorganizing and extending his play schemata (Piaget, 1951/1962). After his preliminary response, I felt compelled to further explore his belief about what constitutes play and asked about the key ingredient needed in play. Participant one reaffirmed his initial answer by commenting that:

“It has to be fun//**It has to be fun?** // Because if you are not having fun when you are playing then its not play, then its training...” (TC #1)

Again, teacher candidate one restates his belief and further expands on this by noting that play is not the same as training because according to him, it is fun. The participant’s comment reflects what has been suggested by many researchers, mainly that there is a play and work dichotomy (Frost et al., 2012). In both instances, the participant made the distinction between play and work by contextualizing his definition of play. Importantly, during the interview, he often drew from his earlier experiences (Nespor, 1987), which in his case, notably, included training for the multiple sports in which he has engaged throughout his life as a child and as an adult.

Like the previous participant discussed above, teacher candidate three also described play initially, as “...just having fun...” and also, provided a definition which consisted of numerous parts (Vygotsky, 1986) as evidenced in the quote retrieved from her interview transcript. In regards to a definition of play, participant three remarked:

“Play is just having fun (laughs). Um, I don’t consider play like when you are in the like the tablet or the video games or I mean I don’t see that as play, I see that more like an addiction (laughs)//**Ok, interesting, but why?** Um, I don’t know I mean when I hear the word play its like playing outside. Playing with anything. Maybe not necessarily outside but with anything, anything that you find (laughs) like how I used to play you know? Like marbles, or a ball or running around, a lot of movement// **So... it has to have movement?** // yes a lot of movement...” (TC #3)

This quote clearly indicated that again, her definition consisted of compound parts that seemed to be interlaced with the idea that play is fun. Her quote also showed that play can include many different activities, characteristics and behaviors (Vygotsky, 1986). Through continuous back and forth attempts at defining play, participant three further stated that play is being active outside and playing with anything, including “...marbles, or a ball, or running around, a lot of movement” and then she concludes her definition by making reference to how she used to play as a child. Information gleaned from memos constructed during this research, indicate that the participant giggled and smiled as she spoke about her recollections of childhood play. Subsequently, when asked about the key ingredient needed in play, like the majority of the respondents in this study, participant three replied:

“Having fun...” (TC #3)

Data gleaned from the memos, indicated that similar to other participants, teacher candidate five smiled throughout her interview and giggled as she drew from her play experiences (Nespor, 1987) as she spoke candidly about her childhood play memories.

Congruently, when asked to define play, participant five indicated that:

“Right now for me... I think it is fun... It is, how I would describe it. I think that when you are playing... If all of us as adults would play, we would get young. But I don’t know how to describe it. It’s because I don’t think that it has a definition...” (TC #5)

It was interesting to see how although participant five begins by saying that for her, “...Right now it is fun...” but then as she continues to think about the phenomenon that is play, she gets a little perplexed and further states, “...It’s because I don’t think that it has a definition...” as illustrated in the quote above. Similar to the rest of the participants in this study, this participant’s depiction of play reflects Vyogtky’s (1986) notion that people think in what he termed, “complexes,” and that their conceptualization of a phenomenon will often consist of varied parts and their ideas about this certain concept may also consist of contradicting beliefs (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

Correspondingly, participant seven appeared to have many positive memories about playing as a child and she frequently drew from her recollections of play in attempting to define play (Nespor, 1987). In a similar way to previous participants’ responses, teacher candidate seven initially described play as fun and her definition of play consisted of an assortment of meanings. This is evident in the following quote chosen from her interview transcript:

“You have to move, exercise, something fun, like climbing, jumping, that is to me play...” (TC#7)

When I asked the participant about the key ingredient needed to be considered play, her belief that play is fun was reiterated with the subsequent response illustrated below. What also reappeared was a portrayal of play that comprised manifold components:

“...Laughing if you are laughing it’s fun... It’s so interesting what propels a child to jump. Do you know what my two-year-old does? He moves all around the house ...then he will climb to the dresser and then, I guess the other dresser or thing for the TV and he will jump not being afraid of anything. He will do it again and again just because it’s fun...” (TC #7)

Furthermore, like the other teacher candidates, participant seven drew from her previous play experiences (Nespor, 1987), and spoke about how her child plays by having fun, in order to provide a definition of it as evidenced in the quote presented above. Similar to other participants, teacher candidate eight who works as a teacher aid (like participants one and seven) responded in the following manner when asked to define or describe what play is to her. She stated:

“Oh well it is fun and its very educational if you know how to use it...//**if you know how to use it...?**//if you know how to use it...if you can incorporate both classroom teaching and play or just as a...as a parent...put things out there for your child to play...but at the same time you’re...you’re teaching them things...that is great because it’s a good experience they’re having fun, they’re relaxing, and they don’t even realize that they’re learning and its easier for them to understand and learn while they play...//**ok...ok...**”(TC #7)

As illustrated in the quote above, participant eight drew on her experiences as a mother and as a teacher aid in order to provide a definition of play and noted the teaching dimensions that are inherent in play (Nespor, 1987). Also, in order to gain a deeper perspective of this participant’s understanding of play, I asked, the following question “What is the key ingredient needed in play?” The participant’s answer to this query reaffirmed her belief about play being

fun and at the same time she extended her answer by offering some contextual tissue, which consisted of multiple parts (Vygotsky, 1986) to support her answer. Participant eight explained:

“One of the most important...laughter... those kids have to be laughing and enjoying themselves...umm any kind of activity would be good I mean as long as they’re enjoying themselves, that’s the most important part of playing, you have to enjoy yourself and if they are not enjoying it they’re not going to learn ...” (TC #8)

During the interview, participant nine spoke openly about her fears of playing outdoors while growing up in Mexico. Out of the ten participants, teacher candidate nine was the only one who spoke about her limitation with play because of her self-described fears as indicated in her interview transcription. Additionally, during the interview, she shared several experiences where she had felt uncomfortable as a child with what was expected of her in social play at school during recess time but claimed that she had to do it (meaning she had to play outdoors). She also spoke about her continued preference for indoor settings as opposed to outdoor settings as an adult. Moreover, she constantly referred to herself as “limited” and “boring” during the interview. For example she stated the following when asked about what she played when she was growing up. Regarding her childhood play, participant nine affirmed that:

“ ...Um I did not play a lot. It was always inside. I, yeah played with my brothers, I don’t know it’s just like I’m always scared so I don’t walk like um underneath trees or I don’t walk on the grass. I’m super limited. I don’t like to swim. I don’t like the beach, I’m a boring person when it comes to that...” (TC #9)

Similar comments to these were made throughout the interview in reference to her being limited, or fearful of playing outdoors. And so, what was compelling about this participant is that when she was asked to define or describe play, her conceptualization of play seemed to echo the other participants' responses, mainly that it was fun. As Vygotsky (1986) suggested, people will often have incongruent ideas about the same concept. In this case, the participant spoke candidly about her fears and limitations during outdoor play and yet, when asked about her definition, she defined it in an opposite way as illustrated in the quote below. Correspondingly, participant nine said the following:

“Play is to have a lot of fun, like it doesn't matter where you are at. I have compared that you do have more fun outside than indoors and when I am with my nephews I do try like... now I go outside like before I did not like play but now I go outside if I take care of my nephews to play...” (TC #8)

In the quote presented above, teacher candidate nine clearly defines play as “...to have a lot of fun...” and further states that she has compared that play is more fun outdoors now that she plays with her nephews. Because this was the first time that a participant spoke about fears and limitations in play, I felt compelled to ask the following question: “Do you believe that your play spaces have expanded because of your nephews?” In response to my query, participant nine discussed at length how she has made changes to her play spaces and also talked about the connection to her nephews:

“Yes, I want to take them out. Yeah I don't like to see them on their iPhone, like on their iPad... I prefer like okay let's go outside, let's go play and then I'll forget you know, Like I know when I tell them that I don't want to go it is like because

of the sun or whatever but I prefer like for me to be in the sun because they have more fun and I think they are wasting their time on the iPad and all that stuff// **So it has to be fun?** // Mhmmm, it has to be fun, it has to be challenging... Because um, I'm really about like safety, like I don't do that, because I'm scared but like I'm trying to let that go because like my nephews will say Nina *yo puedo* (I can do it). Like I can do it. So then I'm like go ahead and do it, but since they are not my kids, I have to be extra careful with them..." (TC #9)

Data revealed that opposing statements continued to unfold in her interview. As noted above, participant nine said that play had to be fun but also challenging and yet, she then stated that she is all about safety. Participant nine further recognized that because of her nephews, she has become more open to playing outdoors despite her fears.

Interestingly, when questioned about the key ingredient needed in play, participant nine stated:

"It has to be fun and safe..." (TC#9)

As I have previously explained, I found that each of the participants seemed to believe that play is "...anything that spontaneously is done for its own sake..." because it is fun and brings joy to the player (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). In this light, the findings presented reverberate what much research has confirmed (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Johnson et al., 2015; Gray, 2013) mainly, that play serves as an enjoyable or fun experience which is essentially based on the players' interpretation. In this study, participants defined play in terms of its positive affect for the player and as previously discussed, this suggests that participants conceptualization of play appears to be emotionally driven.

Playing is Active. Children have a natural inclination to be active and to play (Gray, 2013). In this study, data analysis revealed that participants also defined playing as being active. As much literature reveals (e.g., Frost et al., 2012; Piaget, 1951/1962; Vygotsky, 1986) in play, children take an active role socially, physically, emotionally, and cognitively.

Participants in this study reported to have played actively during their childhood. Teacher candidates keenly spoke about how they engaged in all types of physical play such as: running, biking, climbing trees, and even playing in the mud. Interestingly, participants also talked about being active by talking with friends, making decisions, taking turns, creating rules, and taking active participation in their own play by making their own decisions regarding their play. In this sense, through play, participants engaged in participatory thinking (Dewey, 1938) through their play. Below are several quotes from the participants' interviews that reveal how participants believe play should be active.

Participants remembered that during their childhood they were active and engaged in diverse types of play. When questioned about the behaviors or activities that came to mind when thinking about play, specifically, participant one stated:

“Athletics, moving around...” (TC #1)

In a similar way, participant 2 commented in Spanish:

“Pues... correr, brincar, eh cantar.... brincar en el arbol, brincar en el trampoline, treparme en un arbol, mirar al cielo, [el juego] puede ser cualquier cosa...” (TC #2)

Translation:

“Well, running, jumping, um singing, jumping in a trampoline, climbing a tree, looking at the sky, play can be anything...”(TC #2)

Participant six had many remembrances of her childhood play; she reminisced about playing with her Barbies, playing *Novelas* (soap operas), and also playing Power Rangers with her brother at the beach in Mexico to name just a few examples of what she shared during her interview. When asked about her definition of play, her response was extensive and certainly composed of multiple parts.

After much analysis, I decided to include this quote to support this finding because the essence of her response was that children needed to be actively involved in their play whether it is physically, socially, or cognitively. In response to a definition of play she explained in Spanish:

“Yo creo que es un momento en el cual los niños viven...que es una oportunidad para experimentar, para interactuar, y para tener comunicación, en la que ellos tienen el derecho de aprender a cometer errores, mediante la experimentación y la exploración. El juego es como un regalo para los niños. Un regalo, que nosotros como adultos no podemos ignorar, ya que es una experiencia única que todos los niños deben vivir en su infancia. Y que también es importante que los adultos reconozcan que sólo los recuerdos [sobre el juego] que duran. También un gran porcentaje de los niños no desarrollan sus capacidades de conceptualización hasta que tienen 7 años creo, y que es cuando tienden a encontrar su identidad y es por eso que hay muchos niños o adolescentes que son tímidos porque no aprendieron cuando eran niños lo que se supone que deben de haber aprendido. La palabra lo dice todo, son los niños, y es una parte innata de ellos. El momento llegará cuando van a dejar de ser niños y ya no tendrán ésta oportunidad de sólo jugar ... Como adultos nos encontramos a menudo diciendo

que nos gustaría ser niños otra vez porque como niños todo lo que teníamos que hacer era jugar...”(TC# 6)

Translation:

“I believe that it is a moment that children live that is an opportunity to experiment, to interact, to have communication, one in which they have the right to learn to make mistakes, by experimenting and exploring. Play is like a gift for children. A gift, which we as adults cannot ignore because it is a unique experience which every child should live in their childhood. And it is also important for as adults, it is only the memories [about play] that last. Also a large percentage of children do not develop their conceptualization abilities until they are 7 years old I believe, and that is when they tend to find their identity and this is why there are many children or adolescents that are timid because they did not learn when they were children what they were suppose to have learned. The word says it all, they are children, and it is an innate part of them. The moment will come when they will stop being children and they will no longer have these opportunities of only playing... As adults, we often find ourselves saying that we wish we were children again because as children all we had to do was play...”

(TC #6)

Due to her extensive definition, I asked participant six about the key element needed in play and she identified exploration, as the key component. She affirmed the following:

*“Explorar // **Tiene que tener la exploración?** // Pues para mí sí, por muchas razones, por ejemplo, si tu estás saltando la cuerda tienes que averiguar varias cosas mientras estas saltando...” (TC # 6)*

Translation:

“To explore//**It has to have exploration?** // Well for me yes for many reasons, for example, if you are jumping rope, you have to figure out several things while you are jumping...” (TC #6)

Analogously, participant six also believed that play needs to be active. In the statement below, she explains the physical and motor aspect of being active in play, and thus, participant nine stipulated that for her play is:

“Playing outside, running, climbing, jumping...all that stuff, like that’s basically play...” (TC #9)

The excerpts from the interviews presented above corroborate that the findings for this study are grounded in the data collected and analyzed. As disclosed in the previous quotes, participants perceived play as being active. Virtually, every teacher candidate gave diverse forms of examples that included being active by thinking, making rules, socializing, making friends, jumping, climbing trees, running, and playing with basically any idea or thing that caught their attention. These findings align with different research found in the literature that indicates that children are active participants in play (e.g. Fein, 1975; Watson & Jackowits, 1984). These type of studies are grounded in Piaget’s (1951/1962) seminal work about the child being an active participant in his play experience and thus, in his learning (Piaget, 1951/1962; Johnson et al., 2005). The category of “playing is active” emerged as a major category. As such, it was constructed by several sub-categories that are presented in the subsequent sections.

Playing is social. Researchers such as Parten (1932), Bowlby (1969), Erikson (1963), Piaget (1951/1962) and Vygotsky (1978; 1986) have considered the social nature of playing. For example, research has shown (e.g., Singer & Singer, 1990) that social play fosters social

relationships and helps children with the development of friendships while actively learning about themselves in relation to others (Dewey, 1938).

During their interviews, participants often interweaved experiences of how they actively engaged in all type of social play. As previously talked about, participants drew heavily on their childhood play experiences (Nespor, 1987) and willingly spoke about their play with cousins, brothers, sisters, neighbors, adults and even pets. The following quotes were chosen from the interview transcripts to support the finding of how participants viewed play as being socially active.

For example, teacher candidate seven who works as a teacher aid in a public school in South City, and originally defined play as fun, stated the following in an effort to conclude her manifold meaning of play (Vygotsky, 1986). Participant seven stated:

“...the reason why you’re having them play, is because if not they’re not gonna interact, they’re not gonna have friends, it’ll be different emotionally, socially...//**so its also social...?**//yes definitely social...yeah they have to have social interaction with more kids and you learn to share and learn to do all these things that are important when you’re playing that you don’t know that you’re using it and that you’re learning them because you’re playing and you are having fun...they are safe...”(TC #7)

In the interview, the participant drew from her experiences as a mother and from her knowledge as a teacher aid in order to sort out her definition of play (Nespor, 1987). Like other participants, she connected play with learning and she highlighted that in play children do not know that they are learning because it is fun and safe. This process of using past experiences to make sense of new information is one that again aligns with what Nespor’s research (1987)

proposes, mainly, that people will use former experiences as a scaffold to make meaning of a concept. Similar to other participants in this study, participant seven tried to organize her thoughts about defining play as she talked about it during her interview. Correspondingly, participant one, who is also a teacher aid in a public school in South City, extended his definition by declaring that "...social is a big one..." and asserted that:

"Athletics, moving around, interacting socially. Social is a big one. You have to be social when you are playing. There's just either good social or bad social. I mean if you are angry or something, you are still being social, you have to figure things out. Um movements. Whether it is theater or playing you still got to be moving around and being social..." (TC #1)

This quote by participant one, encapsulates how other participants defined play, primarily, by interweaving different characteristics, and behaviors that make sense to the individual participant based on his or her personal lived experiences with play (Nespor, 1987).

As previously revealed, participant ten did not have an easy time offering a solid definition of play. When asked to define or describe play she gave the following reaction:

"Um, it is interrelated, interrelate with others... it helps you to communicate with your peers, with your friends, to share, you learn to socialize, everyone is different so, so you learn about diversity and differences and preferences, sometimes you get to be the leader and sometimes you get to follow..." (TC #10)

Throughout her interview, participant ten drew from her memories of play and gave several examples of how she played with cousins and neighborhood friends. Furthermore, during the discussion she shared that although she enjoyed being the teacher during play, she allowed

the same opportunity in an effort to continue to play. When asked about the most important quality of play, she responded by saying, “fun” like the majority of the participants.

In the same way, teacher candidate three gave the following response:

“Yes definitely social... most of the time more than one person playing... At least two people involved or more...” (TC #3)

Participant two spoke about how she believed that play is social and that in play children learn to foster friendships. Participant two stated in Spanish:

“...aprenden a ser amigos...” (TC #2)

Translation:

“...they learn to make friends...” (TC #2)

Participants’ responses parallel the work of pioneers who have postulated that play is a social human activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1938). From this point of view, children actively and simultaneously engage with themselves and others through play in socially mediated activities (Dewey, 1910). Compellingly, in play, it is this “...social dance of self and other...” that provokes children to understand themselves in relation to others (Jewett, 2008).

Playing is creative and imaginative. Researchers have propositioned that creativity and imagination are critically important to children’s development and learning (e.g., Singer & Singer, 1985; Singer & Singer, 1998; Vygotsky, 1930/2004). In play, children use their imagination to create or re-create something new. Researchers have also proposed that play serves as a safe space for self-reflection and self-expression where children engage in “as if” and “what if” thoughts which lead to diverse opportunities to explore (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). As Vygotsky (1930/2004) argues, play serves as a significant learning space that permits creativity

to surface in children's minds. Importantly, Vygotsky (1939/2004) reminds us about children's creativity and its importance to development by affirming that:

“One of the most important areas of child and educational psychology is the issue of creativity in children, the development of this creativity and its significance to the child's general development and maturation. We can identify creative processes in children at the very earliest ages, especially in their play. A child who sits astride a stick and pretends to be riding a horse; a little girl who plays with a doll and imagines she is its mother; a boy who in his games becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, all these children at play represent examples of the most authentic, truest creativity. Everyone knows what an enormous role imitation plays in children's play. A child's play very often is just an echo of what he saw and heard adults do; nevertheless, these elements of his previous experience are never merely reproduced in play in exactly the way they occurred in reality. A child's play is not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired. He combines them and uses them to construct a new reality, one that conforms to his own needs and desires” (p. 11).

From Vygotsky's (1930/2004) perspective, play, in particular pretend play, serves as a conduit to higher cognitive abilities, which lead to development and diverse creative expressions. In this light, in this study, several participants conceptualized play as imaginative and creative. For example, like most of the participants in this study, participant four struggled to give play a concrete definition. As confirmed by the quote presented below, she verbally recognized that it is difficult to put play into words. Resembling other participant's definitions, her description was

lengthy and fragmented but at the same time, connected and interlaced with the idea that play needs to be free. Participant four defined play in the following way offered below:

“Play, I would define it...umm...let’s see... being creative, being...expressing yourself through play is like completely being yourself, not being afraid to be imaginative, how do I understand it? Hmmm...its cause when I speak about it is kind its hard to put into words but I feel like play is free and doing whatever you want expressing yourself however you want and just not worry about anything else but you create your own world when you play and you...and like you can be the mayor of your own world or you can be the teacher of your own world, you can be whatever you want. I think that is amazing because it expands your imagination and then it makes you think like what you’d actually want to be when you grow up, I think...umm...just freedom...that’s like the perfect word, I should put that in my bubble (laughs) freedom...” (TC #4)

Notably, participant four begins her definition of play by describing it as creative and states, “...you create your own world or can be the teacher of your own world...” then she also talked about how “it [play] expands your imagination...” Like most of the participants, participant four also perceived play as related to freedom. This aspect of her definition will be discussed in the following sections.

When asked what activities or behaviors came to her mind when she thought about play teacher candidate four stated that she perceived play in the following way:

“ I think of play...I picture blocks...umm...I don’t know why, oh I guess because when I...the first image that comes to my head is...have you seen the movie Lilo and Stitch and where Stitch is building like a city with building blocks and then

he pretends like he's a monster and he's knocking things over...I don't know why but that is the first image I...it comes to mind...like just playing with objects or you don't even need objects, you can just pretend you're like in the woods or even use your house you know cause maybe some children don't have
ahh...toys...they are not able to get toys but I mean your imagination can take you places//**so...you can play with other things and not necessarily things**//yeah (giggles)(TC #4).

Of importance, was the participant's idea that you can play with virtually anything. Additionally, she spoke about pretending during her play, which also requires imaginative and creative skills. Furthermore, she restated, "...imagination can take you places..." The participant's perspective parallels what Wood (2013) states, "Children do not just play with objects and materials: they also play with emotions, meanings, ideas, roles, rules, and relationships and can make significant cognitive leaps and transformations..." (p. 31).

As substantiated by the quotes that were pulled from her transcript, participant's four responses were lengthy and contextualized with remembrances of her childhood play. Beneath is the response teacher candidate four provided about the key ingredient needed in play. She affirmed:

"Well, imagination because...umm...because sometimes for children...I mean I know for me like regular, the real world wasn't the fun place for me you know, like my parents would be like at work and I'd have school and school was fun but then I'd get home and do homework and there wasn't much else...so you know I'd like create like my own world with like my cousins or even with me, I would play with my Barbies and pretend we were in Alaska or wherever I wanted,

anywhere but my room I guess (giggles) //**anywhere but your room?**//yeah
(giggles) and...ummm...and just using your imagination, I think it's really
important because...ummm...because when...for a child, I mean I was always in
the house so I wouldn't have...and I have an older sister but she's 5 years older
than me, when I was in elementary she was already in middle school with her
friends like hanging out, hating the world already...(giggles) but uhh...I didn't
really have...I only played well with my cousins so...when I wasn't with my
cousins I was with my dog or cat and they were my friends...yeah... so I think
imagination is key for play//**so imagination would be the key component for
play?**//u huh...yes//**ok...**" (TC #4)

With this quote, participant four reaffirms her belief in play as being creative and imaginative. She also speaks of how she needed to be creative and imaginative as a child in order to have fun. The participant explains that this was because she often played alone, being that her parents worked, and the only ones left to play with were her pets.

In the same way, participant two considered that play needs to be creative and imaginative. Like the rest of the teacher candidates who took part in this study, play was part of her experience growing up. As such, teacher candidate two spoke about how she enjoyed playing all types of outdoors games with friends and neighbors where she got to explore and imagine during play. Please note that her interview was conducted in English but because she requested to reply in Spanish, I agreed to conduct the interview in this manner.

Below is the reaction participant two offered me during the interview. In Spanish she commented:

“...Para mi es una forma de aprender y explorar y descubrir tu propia forma...bueno pues de nino es la forma de que uno descubre las cosas...”(TC #2)

Translation:

“For me it is the way in which one learns and explores and discovers your own way, well as a child, it is the way that one discovers things...”(TC #2)

Creativity can also be viewed as an aspect of problem solving where children have to use their imaginative and creative abilities to perform some type of task (Fisher, 1992). For example, when asked about the key ingredient in play, participant two answered in Spanish:

“Para mi serian los juegos que mas disfrutas en mi opinion son los que desconoces. Por decir por ejemplo, si alguien te invita y te pregunta has jugado esto y contestas no//Entonces el ingrediente seria lo desconocido?//si... lo desconocido” (TC #2)

Translation:

“ ... For me, it would have to be the games that you most enjoy the most in my opinion are the games that you haven't discovered. For example if someone asks you, have you played this? and you answer no...//**So then are you saying that the unknown is the key ingredient?**// Yes, the unknown...”(TC #2)

As demonstrated through the participants' narrative accounts, teacher candidates in this study also conceptualized play as being creative and imaginative which requires active participation from the player. This finding is consistent with the notion that in play children are active participants who are able

to use their imagination to creatively create their present and future play experiences (Vygotsky, 1930/2004).

Playing is freedom. It has been proposed, that, “Freedom is a hallmark of play” (Gordon, 2009, p. 5). Freedom is cited in the literature as one of the key characteristic of play (e.g., Rubin, Fein, & Vanderberg, 1983; Huizinga, 1955; Gray; 2013, Louv, 2008). As such, many researchers have given their interpretation of play as freedom. For example, the inspirational work of Diane Ackerman (1999) speaks of the freedom to play and how it allows the player to experience the world in a multitude of ways, through the wisdom of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and predominantly, by being in tune with what is offered in the natural world. Play is also perceived as freedom by Louve (2008), whose work highlights the compelling changes in children’s play that include the autonomy to play without adult intervention or supervision in natural settings. According to Louve (2008), play that is free of parental influences and that takes place outdoors demands full use of the senses in children. In essence, this freedom allows for the imagination to unleash (Greene, 1995), which is critical to children’s developmental and learning potential (Frost et al., 2012). As Louve (2008) reminds us, “In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy: a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace” (p. 7). More recently, Peter Gray (2014b), who has lectured and written extensively about children’s innate drive to play freely, has suggested that through the instinctive process of freely choosing what to play and how to play, children can benefit from learning and achieve developmental outcomes. In his most recent book, Gray’s (2013) central premise is his compelling argument regarding the importance of free play in children’s lives (p. 8). The following quote captures this message:

“Children are biologically, predisposed to take charge of their own education.

When they are provided with the freedom to take charge of their own learning

interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths, and they acquire the skills and confidence required to meet life's challenges" (p. 7).

In this quote, Gray (2013) appropriately encapsulates the significance of the freedom to play by underscoring how play provides children with foundational skills, such as taking control of their thinking, which is certainly a skill needed to prepare for life's future trials. Concurring with the data analyzed, participants conveyed that play could be defined as freedom as evidenced in the quotes presented below. For instance, as a child from working parents who often played alone, participant four spoke about the occasional challenges to play with others and how she often engaged in imaginative play with her dolls, toys and even her cat. Additionally, she spoke about how she looked forward to playing with her younger cousins who provided a major source for social play. Participant four observed play as a means of being free as illustrated below:

"...Yes play is free and doing whatever you want expressing yourself how ever you want and just not worrying about anything else but you create your own world when you play and you...and like you can be the mayor of your own world or you can be the teacher of your own world, you can be whatever you want. I think that is amazing because it expands your imagination and then it makes you think like what you'd actually want to be when you grow up, I think...umm...just freedom...that is like the perfect word, I should put that in my bubble (laughs)... freedom" (TC #4)

Analogous to other participants' responses, by discussing her definition of play, teacher candidate four went back to thinking about what she would add to her play web. It seems that in talking about it, she somehow extended her original description of play. Correspondingly, in

giving her definition of play, participant three used multiple words with diverse meaning to construct a definition for play. Her definition is rendered in the following quote:

“Well I mean people that play are usually happy, excited, um free and in peace//
in peace? // Mhmmm, Yes// **Ok...**” (TC #3)

Grounded on the data amassed and examined, participants in this study seem to believe that play is freedom. As previously discussed, this finding resonates with what early thinkers such as Rousseau (1976), and now contemporary researchers such as Gray (2013), continue to proclaim, principally, that play should be freely chosen by the children and guided by their innate interests. Participants in this study seem to believe that children should have the choice to select what they wish to play. As confirmed by Wood (2009), “What distinguishes play from other educational activities is that children have the freedom and autonomy to make choices based on their personal needs and interests, which enables them to control or direct play activities” (p. 45). Principally, the driving force to play freely in a safe space is what encourages children to actively take the lead in their individual learning and development (Gray, 2013; Smith, 2010). As Duarte and Cortez-Castro (2015) remind us, “...play provides a safe platform for young children to express their joy, to free their imagination, to develop curiosity, to question, to explore, and to test their hypothesis” (p. 5). As previously discussed in detail, findings suggest that participants perceived play as being free because the player actively chooses what to play, where to play, who to play with and when to play- essentially in play, children are free to create and re-create their own learning as proposed by Dewey (1910; 1938).

Playing is risky and rough. Free play is full of opportunities to be active and to take risks, to be adventurous, to test boundaries, and to engage in challenging situations (Gray, 2014a; Singer & Singer, 1985; Smith, 2010). As Ackerman (1999) reminds us, “To play is to risk: to

risk is to play” (p. 7). In this study, participants sought fearful experiences related to height, velocity and unpredictable outcomes as proposed by Sandester & Kennari (2011). As such, during the interview, teacher candidates shared how they engaged in risky play (Almon, 2013), which is sometimes referred to as rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play, is a term that originated from Harlow and Harlow’s (1965) research on animal play, and that remains a “neglected aspect of play” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Moreover, Pellegrini & Boyd (1993) contend that this type of play, includes “...play face, run chase, flee wrestle and open-hand beat” (p. 115). Although rough and tumble play has typically been identified as a male form of play in previous research studies (e.g., Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed & Brown, 2000; Reed, 2005; Sandaster, 2007a) in this present study, several female participants spoke candidly about how play to them meant being active outdoors. For example, participants stated that they engaged in rough and risky activities such as running, climbing, jumping out of trees, and even chasing after the train. As Gray (2014a) reminds us, “Children are highly motivated to play in risky ways, but they are also very good at knowing their own capacities and avoiding risks they are not ready to take, either physically or emotionally” (p. 20).

Regarding risky play, participant two spoke about her play and shared how she used to chase trains when she was a little girl. She shared the following during the interview when talking about how she would describe or define play, in Spanish she stated:

“...recuerdo que nunca media los riesgos, siempre era de que quiero hacer esto, quiero brincar de aquel árbol...disfrutaba mucho brincar, mi abuela vivía cerca de las vías del tren y entonces nos gustaba mucho asi como correr de tras del tren, tirarle cosas al tren, andar en la naturaleza, en los lagos... recuerdo que mi

tia tenia una casa de dos pisos y entonces nos gustaba brincar del segundo piso al sacate...” (TC #2)

Translation:

“I remember that I would never measure the risks, I would always be like I want to do this, or I want to jump from that tree, ...I would really enjoy to jump, my grandmother would live next the railroad tracks, and so we would really like to run after the train and throw things at the train...just to be outside in nature, in the lake... I remember that my aunt had a two story house and we would like to jump from the second floor all the way to the grass...” (TC #2)

Correspondingly, participant seven spoke about how play needed to be risky and rough. Her recollections of play included instances where she jumped from great heights. During the interview, she talked about how she once jumped from the top of a light pole when she used to live in Mexico while playing hide and seek because she wanted to be the winner of the game. When asked about her definition of play she responded, with “rough” at some point in the interview, and then, when asked to explain this, she shared the following statement.

“Now that you say that, we used to play hide and seek and we had agreed that that the last one to be found that was the winner...So where did I decide to hide? Have you seen the pole where they put the electricity?//**you mean the light pole, like outside?**// I was climbing the pole, and here I am, oh my God, now I think about it I was like no wonder my parents would often say, *No, no vas a ir a jugar* (No, you are not going to go outside to play)...And that time I remember that I climbed up the light pole and my friends were like, ok you are the winner, you know what it's to high ok hold on, let me go call your dad and I was like No! Don't call him!

So they had to call my little friend's dad so they could get me down...But I was like don't call my dad because he won't let me play anymore, now I that I think about it and it is funny to me//**It is funny, but how did you even get up there I mean?//** I don't know, I mean I wasn't thinking I was just thinking I'm going to be the winner! My daughter, the middle one, she is just like me

Changa (Monkey) (TC #7)

Additionally, she shared how she jumped from the roof of a second story house to the ground. She stated the following:

“Listen, listen to this, my neighbors were building the house, they were building a two-story house but they didn't have the little fence so we would get on the ladder and my house was the next house. And I would tell my friends ok we are going to do this. We are going to start running really fast and we are going to jump to my neighbor's roof. I mean are you kidding me, It's like one meter or even more ok we are going to jump but we need to jump. I mean oh my gosh, I was 8 years old 8 years old when I jumped from the second story of my neighbors house to the ground!” (TC #7)

These experiences parallel what is found in the literature regarding children's innate desire to jump from great heights (Bjorklund & Pellegrini; 2000; Sandseter, 2007). Data gleaned from a memo that resulted from this teacher candidate's interview showed that she seemed very eager to talk about her childhood play and during the interview she laughed and gave in depth descriptions of how she would engage in all type of play with minimal commercialized toys. In fact, she shared that she only had a few dolls because of her family's economic circumstances. However, she claimed to have not missed out on anything because the outdoors provided her

with a multitude of play opportunities. For example, she shared that she would use a *baño* which is a washbasin made of aluminum, that is typically used to wash clothes by hand in Mexico. She explained that this *baño* was used as a swimming pool and as a house, and that she used to jump into it without any fear pretending that it was a swimming pool.

In their accounts of play, participants perceived play as being risky in some form or another. The only participant who did not specifically state that she engaged in some form of rough or risky play was participant nine. Yet, when sharing her recollections of play in Mexico she did speak about playing all type of traditional games during recess time that involved loco motor play, such as chasing and running after her friends, and having to follow all type of game rules. For example she stated:

“Even playing is like when I was younger in school they used to play *voto* (I vote), and all that like ok you have to play you have to run and they pass it to the other one...yes you say *voto, voto, voto, por...*(I vote, I vote, I vote for)//**how do you play voto?**//...yeah like they are all together and they all say *voto, voto por M!*... and then I have to stay there for a couple of seconds and then, they all run and you need to run and catch them and once you catch them, and touch them and you say *voto* and then that person has it and then you have to run... So now I play *voto* with my nephews...”(TC #9)

Although she did not proclaim to have jumped off from trees or chased after trains like other participants claimed to have done during their childhood play, participant nine still took risks as part of her play by making constant decisions that required taking risks, for example by engaging in chasing games like *voto*. Again, this finding indicates that

children actively engage in rough and risky play through their own choice and innate drive (Almon, 2013). Importantly, this finding corresponds with the current research that supports the importance of rough and risky play for young children's overall development and learning (Almon, 2013; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Pellegrini, 2011).

Playing With What is Not Play. In attempting to define play, several participants articulated what they did not consider to be play. For example, during his interview participant one highlighted that play is not training because playing is fun. Participant three also spoke freely about what she did not consider to be play. In particular, she spoke about how she did not consider being on the tablet or on the computer as play. She stated:

“Um I don't consider play like when you are on the like the tablet or the video games or I mean I don't see that as play I see that is more like an addiction (laughs)...” (TC #3)

This finding parallels the work of Gordon (2009), who wrote about what play is not, and affirmed that, “ Play stops when participants are not free to not play, become objects of play or a unaware that they are involved in play” (p.10). Moreover, participant seven described how she did not believe that play included video games or cell phones. Highlighting what is not play to her, participant seven stated that:

“...I don't believe in the video games, I don't believe that they need a cell phone//**no**//I have my 12 year old, she says, mom my friends have cell phones I say, they are your friends, You are who? Oh you are Daniela, ok yea, you are who? You are my daughter ok, do you need a phone? No you don't need a phone, if you have an emergency go to the office and you say//**you have an emergency**//(mutual laughs) I have an emergency, Ok I guess you don't need a

cell phone right now, you don't work, you don't pay for it (mutual laughs)..."

(TC #7)

Teacher candidate eight also expressed what she did not consider to be play. She commented the following:

"...it has to be fun or if not, it is going to be work..." (TC #8)

Based on the data analyzed, it could be suggested that in playing with their conceptualization of play, participants made meaning by talking about what they did not consider as play. Participants' responses speak to what has also been written in the literature, primarily, that there are certain characteristics or behaviors that are not accepted as play (Gordon, 2009; Frost et al., 2012). Compellingly, others (e.g., Moyles, 1989) have also proposed that it is impossible to define play because of its interpretive nature.

To this point, I have argued that participants in this study played with conceptualizing play as they constructed and re-constructed their definition (Vygotsky, 1986). In conceptualizing their definition of play, collectively, participants' responses indicated that they have multiple ways of defining play that consist of compound parts. As Pellegrini and Smith (2003) remind us, definitions of play are often "multidimensional" (p. 277). According to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) for Vygotsky (1986), a person thinking in "complexes" would explain a concept in various ways, sometimes, even defining it in ambiguous means. Significantly, these contradictions emerged in the data. For example, participant nine appeared to be thinking in complexes (Vygotsky, 1986) as she went back and forth between conceptualizing play as fun but insisted that it needed to be safe. A significant discovery also transpired when I asked about the key ingredient needed in play and many of the teacher candidates replied that it had to be fun, which suggests that participants' definitions are emotionally driven. What was also noteworthy is

that in defining play, every participant drew from his or her personal lived experiences with play. Importantly, teacher candidates contextualized their definition in a manner that was consistent with their individual prior experiences and which often transpired in mediated activities in relationships with others (Nespor, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). As suggested by Vygotsky's (1986) theory of concept formation, essentially, participants seemed to pull from their spontaneous concepts, which Vygotsky (1986) referred to as, "...structural, empirical, and practical" in order to provide a definition of play. As formerly explained, Vygotsky (1986) believed that spontaneous concepts progress from everyday experiences which play a role in influencing how we think. In this case, these everyday experiences appeared to have influenced participants' definition of play. Suggestively, these findings corroborate with Vygotsky's (1978) social cultural and historical theory, which proposes that learning, is socially, culturally, and historically situated (Wertsch, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978,1986).

Valuing Play in Everyday Life

Participants spoke candidly about their play in terms of everyday life. Play seemed to be a normal part of their daily life as a children and although finding time to play appeared to be challenging as adults, teacher candidates continued to interweave play into their day-to-day life. In the following sections I explicate why the participants in this study seem to value play.

Positively Experienced Play in Childhood. As previously discussed, Hispanic teacher candidates who took part in this study seem to value play and this was demonstrated through their numerous positive recollections of their childhood play during each interview. The recurring pattern that emerged throughout the study was that all participants played as children, although whom they played with, where they played, and what they played differed. In order to learn about their childhood play, I asked participants to remember what they played when they

were children. For example, I asked questions such as: “What did you play?” “Whom did you play with?” and “Where did you play?” Essentially, these questions were asked in order to gain a deeper understanding about the participants play experiences as children.

A review of the notes I constructed after the interviews indicate that while participants talked about their childhood play, they often had smiles and even laughed or giggled while responding to my questions, which suggests that play for these participants is viewed favorably. In the sections that follow, information that supports this category is presented, namely, that teacher candidates engaged in diverse types of play as children. For example, they played in varied settings, they played with family, friends, and neighbors, and they also played with animals. Analysis of the data also unveiled that the participants who took part in this study engaged in diverse forms of play. For instance, many participants spoke about playing with dolls, action figures and even pets. When asked about her childhood play, participant four shared the following statement regarding how she enjoyed playing with Barbie dolls. She stated:

“Barbies...all the time (both laugh)...I had a lot of, a lot of Barbies and I had the outfits for them, I remember my...I had this special box my mom gave me to carry my, like little, kind of a purse thingy...yeah...and I would carry all my Barbies in there and put all their clothes in there and I would just play with them all the time...I loved them...” (TC #4)

Participant ten also spoke about playing with dolls, including Barbie dolls and how she used to play in her miniature house with was built by her dad. She stated:

“I liked to play with Barbies, I had like a collection of 25 of them with all their accessories...I liked to play to be a mommy, I liked to play house, I used to play with dolls, and with the little dishes, and I had basically everything, um my dad

build me a house when I was little, it was light pink with white and it even had a little porch, it had the little chairs and furniture, I took care of all my things that I got every Christmas...”(TC #10)

Teacher candidates also spoke about engaging in risky play by climbing trees, chasing other children, and jumping off of high things such as trees and light poles as previously discussed (Almon, 2013). Other participants spoke about how they rode their bicycles, played with mud, or played more organized games like soccer. In talking about play teacher candidate seven stated:

“...Oh, I loved playing with the mud, I loved playing with the mud and then I remember, we had like a tree house, it was not actually a tree house, but it was a tree, and then we would take like the pieces of clothes, you name it, it was outside and I remember like I said, it was at Monterrey at that time, it was hot, it was summer, and it was fun...*Entonces eramos humildes* (we were of humble upbringing)...No habia asi (there was not like) like the big house with swimming pool, don't think so (mutual laughs)I remember we used to have a big ice chest, I remember we would fill it out with water, I would call my neighbors, “you want to come to my swimming pool?” I remember my dad, We had a huge pecan tree and we had a big swing, and I would tell my friends, you know what, I have a big idea I am going to put a ladder over there and I'm going to get on the swing and I'm going to jump in the swimming pool and they were laughing at me, you are crazy, no, no, no, this is going to be fun, wait and see, this is going to be fun and Whoopsi out of the pool...”(TC #7)

For example, when asked about what he remembered playing when he was a child participant one spoke positively about his recollections of playing soccer outdoors. He affirmed:

“My family is all about soccer, we play soccer that is what we do. Um we had an engine as one of the goals and a rock as a goal. So we had a goal// **Engine? Do you mean a car engine?** //A car engine... (Mutual laughs)... We would go outside and play soccer all day...//So you played soccer? //Since I was little...I don't think kids do it nowadays. I remember when we were little we had a field next to our house and we would go out in the middle of the night with my brother and sister to go get light bugs, and catch them. We would play baseball outside, soccer, kickball...but yes, I have played since I was little// **so you played?** // I played... (TC #1)

In the quote above, participant one acknowledges that he played as a child and shared some of the different forms in which he engaged in play. What was also noteworthy in his response is that he made the connection to how children today don't seem to play outdoors as much as they used to do in the past.

Many participants spoke about how they used their creativity and imagination as they engaged in many forms of pretend play (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). For instance, participant six stated the following:

“Que yo era una maestra ... jugábamos mucho a que éramos maestras, la mayoría de las veces jugaba con un grupo de chicas, y nos gustaba pretender que éramos las maestras y también nos gustaba pretender jugar a la telenovela...”
(TC #6)

Translation:

“That I was a teacher...we would play a lot that we were teachers, the majority of the time I would play with a group of girls, and we would like to pretend that we were teachers and we would also pretend to play soap opera...”(TC #6)

During the interviews, participants spoke of the many spaces that provided opportunities for play. Most of the participants spoke about playing in outdoors spaces and yet some, played in indoor spaces such as their own bedrooms. As proposed by Singer and Singer (1990), “There must be a *place* for play, as a “sacred space” (no matter how small), and *time*, open-ended and unstructured” (p. 4). When asked about where she played as a child, participant three replied:

“Outside, at my neighbor’s house, my friend’s house... um we would sometimes go to Matamoros and we would play over there...we would just be outside for hours. We would ride our bikes, go around the neighborhood...” (TC #3)

In our discussion about play, participant eight gave a lengthy response about where she played as a child. She stated:

“Oh my god...umm...the backyard of my old low income house and it was a big old tree that it was like ahh...mesquite tree//**u huh...**//it was like slanted, it was growing...nice shade...umm...my sister and I we were ahh...we would always get...kicked out of the house like...go play go play outside (laughs)//**your mom would say go play?...**//yeah my mom would say go play...and so we would go and there we would play...we pretended to be teachers or we would collect all those little ahh...cans from mom’s cooking you know...leftover trash and we would put them and it was our little store and we would sell things from our store (laughs)//**hmm...the HEB or the Wal-Mart?...**//yeah HEB or Wal-Mart but it

was in Mexico so it was HEB or whatever they had as a store... *a las tienditas*...but it was...the wall...it was a concrete wall so we used that as our chalk-board when it was teaching time and then our babies of course and you've seen the flowers from the tree...the mesquite tree...to make the little soups and everything, the mud...and mud pies that we would do...(giggles)//**of course...of course...ok...so it was...it was usually outside...?//it was outside, yes...**" (TC #8)

Yet other participants spoke about how their play was always indoors. For example, participant nine stated:

"...No outdoor play, it was with dolls or watching TV..."

However, there were some contradictions in participant nine's responses because she initially said that she only played indoors but interestingly, she was talking about her play at home. As the interview proceeded, she began to share how she would also play games like *voto voto*, which is a traditional Mexican game of chasing. As she was talking about how she played these games, what emerged was that she played these games during recess at school in Mexico. Below is an excerpt that shows this contradiction:

"...**Did you play that in Matamoros?** // Yeah I studied all my life in Matamoros so, but, I did used to play that in school like had to because I was in school and I didn't want to be the one that // **So you would play outdoor games when you were in school in Matamoros?** //Well yeah I had to because I did not want to be signaled out//**right, right**//so I had to but I didn't enjoy it, I sucked at it. Like I would run very slowly when playing football... I was like no...I was a mess.... I am not a sport person..." (TC #9)

As previously discussed, when asked about whom they played with, participants reported to have played with family, friends and neighbors. The following are some quotes that support this finding. For example, participant ten reported that she played mostly with her neighbors and friends because she was the oldest of three daughters and there was a large age gap amongst her and her siblings. Participant ten explained:

“Yes, I played with my neighbors and friends everyday... we would play...sometimes we would put tables and we would pretend to play restaurant, we also played doctor’s office and we would fix everything needed for the doctor’s office, we had the little toys that would go with it, and I liked to play the teacher, most of the time I was the teacher, yeah I wanted to have the kids engaged and occupied...” (TC #10)

Participant one spoke about how he played with his niece since they were close in age. He remarked:

“Yeah, I played with my niece. She is two years younger. I guess we played with, I had my ninja turtles and she had her Barbies...” (TC #1)

Teacher candidate four remembered how she played with her two younger cousins. She stated:

“...I remember I had two younger cousins...umm...one is two years apart...two years younger than me and the other one is four years younger than me and we were like three peas in a pod, I guess cause we were like always together and we would always play...”(TC #4)

Data analysis revealed, that each participant played diverse types of play, played with friends, neighbors and siblings and even pets, and they played in diverse places, which included

indoor and outdoor spaces. Additionally, eight out of the ten participants reported to have played in two different countries, Mexico and the United States. Essentially, these positive play experiences appeared to have laid a foundation for their attitude or disposition towards engaging in play as part of their everyday life.

Positively Experienced Play in Adulthood. Because beliefs happen over time (Fives & Gill, 2015) participants were initially asked questions about their childhood play, and as evidenced in the sections above, these experiences were optimistic and show that they value their childhood play. Examination of the data revealed that every participant in this study continues to play in their everyday life in some respect. Since all participants replied that they do presently engage in some form of play, they were asked about what they play, and when was the last time they played. Participant one stated that he plays every day. He engages in play by playing a variety of sports and coaching. Participant two plays with her children as often as she can. She explained that the last time that she played was during Easter break with her son. For participant four, time to play is limited but she sometimes plays with a little girl she babysits or she also enjoys playing with her grownup friends by just going to the movies. Participant five enjoys playing with her husband and family. She stated that the last time she played was a card game with her sisters and family. Participant five explained that every Friday she gets together with her family to play. Participant six indicated that the last time she played was with this little boy whom she met during a visit. She also shared that she often plays with children and adolescents through the courses that she teaches as part of her church. Participant seven claimed to play every day. From the observations made during the interview, participant seven had a very playful and positive attitude about play. She was detailed in her delivery of responses and seemed interested throughout the duration of the interview. Like many of the participants in this study,

her first language was not English, and although the interview questions were asked in English, as per her request, some of her responses showed how she used “translanguaging” in her responses. According to García (2011):

“Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic feature or various mode of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential. It is an approach to bilingualism that is centered, not on languages, as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds. Translanguaging therefore goes beyond what has been termed code switching, although it includes it” (p. 140).

Thus, when asked about the last time that she played, participant seven responded in the following way:

“The last time that I played? today//**today?**//yes today// **with your kids?**//yes the students and actually my babies, my kids (laughs), yes my kids// **you have a two year old?**//yes, I have a two year old...I usually take them to the park in the afternoon *y nos vamos a jugar* (and we go play)...”(TC #7)

Participant eight said that she enjoys playing with her students and also with her nephews being that her children are now grown. She also said that she enjoys gardening and that she sees this as play. For participant nine, play is with her nephews and she indicated that the last time that she played was during the mud play day and with her nephews in her house. Finally, participant ten spoke about playing with her niece. She alleged that the last time she played was a few days ago with her niece and that they engaged in all type of play including board games, coloring, and even cooking activities.

Examination of the data uncovered that each participant had their own unique story about play and at the same time, participants' stories had similarities. As adults, although the frequency of their play varied between "frequently" and "sometimes" the data revealed that they played as children and continue to play despite challenges to play as adults with all types of responsibilities. As a result, the data analysis suggests that the ten Hispanic teacher candidates who took part in this study value play as part of their everyday life. In the part that follows I briefly discuss how participants appear to believe in the value of play despite perceived challenges and future barriers to play.

Believing in Play Despite Perceived Challenges and Future Barriers to Play. As suggested by previous research, there are multiple challenges to play in the United States (Almon & Miller, 2011; Barlette, 2011; Frost, 2010; Goldhaber, 1994; Goldstein, 2008; Gray, 2014b). From this point of view, the examination of the data revealed that participants faced challenges regarding play in their personal lives.

For example, participant one spoke about his physical challenge with his arm and how he struggled with certain motor abilities growing up. Yet, this has not stopped him from playing. Additionally, participant's two, three and five spoke about challenges to play with their own children or to find time to play for their own leisure because of their busy schedule with school and domestic responsibilities. Nonetheless, they all stated that they makes an effort to make time to play with their children, especially now that they have gained a new understanding of the value of play. Teacher candidate four spoke about how she doesn't really engage in much play with children because there are no small children in her family. However, she did state that she occasionally plays with her friend's child when babysitting. Additionally, she spoke of the challenge to play due to work responsibilities. Participant six spoke about the limited resources

to play as a child and how she often played with natural materials such as sand, water and left-over material from her father's shrimping job. Fears were another topic that emerged during the data analysis process. For example, participant nine spoke candidly about her fears and limitations with play, but despite these fears, today she creates opportunities and play spaces to play with her nephews. Participants two and three also spoke about the lack of space, and fear for the safety of their children as a challenge to play. However, they both stated that they are conscious of the value and need to play and thus, they make play opportunities possible. Participant ten stated that she is currently raising teenage boys and that she is struggling with finding a way to continue to engage in play with her children. Findings suggest that although participants face daily challenges to play, they still engage in some form of play and plan to continue to find the time to play especially after their new gained knowledge about the benefits that come with playing.

Participants in this study also spoke candidly about the perceived barriers that they will face as future teachers due to the current accountability driven climate (Almon & Miller, 2011). These concerns show that participants are already thinking about play in terms of their future, and this reaffirms that they seem to value play in education.

For instance, participant three expressed her fear about implementing play due to what she has observed through her field observations in different school settings. Participant three, stated:

“Yeah I’m kind of worried because you know I don’t know if I kind of try to go into bringing in play in the classroom, I don’t know how other people are going to see it. If they are going to approve it or are they going to think that you know I am

taking it [play] as a joke or something. Because it [play] is not implemented right now in most classrooms...” (TC #3)

Participant three followed this comment with this statement:

“... Yes, because I know there has to be a number of people that think that play is important and yet they don't do it because they are scared about their administration...” (TC #3)

This last statement points to a primary finding of this study which is that some of the participants expressed their concern about how administration and/or the other teachers would react to them as teachers if they found out that they were integrating play as part of their classroom teaching. Participant three was particularly concerned about how she was going to be perceived, and seemed worried about being taken seriously. Thus, concerns about implementing play in today's standards-driven climate is a topic that is found in the recent literature and a topic that play advocates have voiced (Almon & Miller, 2011). This finding corresponds with a study by Ranz-Smith (2007) who found that first grade teachers who valued play also listed administrative concerns over classroom management as a deterrent for including play and movement in the curriculum. In sum, participants in this study seem to play in everyday life and in education despite challenges and perceived barriers.

Shifting Beliefs About the Value of Play for Learning and Development in Education

As previously discussed, participants in this study value play as part of their everyday living. However, findings suggest that prior to their teacher education program, in particular, to the course with Dr. Dubai, participants did not see the educational value of play within the school context.

The value of play for children is evident in the literature (Pellegrini, 2011; Piaget, 1951/1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Researchers, theorists and practitioners suggest that play can serve as a vehicle for learning and development. As stated by Vygotsky (1976), “play is a leading source of development” and in this current study, findings reveal that participants saw the value of children’s play in relation to their learning and development.

Significantly, most teacher candidates indicated that prior to their experiences (Nespor, 1987) in the environment class with Dr. Dubai, they did not necessarily feel that play was important for learning or development. However, their responses further suggest that after this course, their conceptual understanding (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1986) about the value of children’s play has changed (Vygotsky, 1986). As a result, participants now appear to recognize that play is valuable to children’s learning and development as opposed to only seeing it valuable as an everyday activity that occurs out of school or educational settings (Vygotsky, 1986). This conceptual change in their level of understanding of play indicates that their mental schema (Piaget 1951/1962) to conceptualize play shifted from spontaneous to scientific, as proposed by Vygotsky (1986). In what follows, I explore the findings that suggest that participants believe in the value of play in terms of learning and development.

Playing is Valuable for Social Development. The value of play as a vehicle for social development is often cited in the play literature (Erikson, 1963; Gray, 2013, Parten, 1932). When researching children’s social development, researchers often refer to Parten’s (1932) seminal work on children’s social play. In her classic study on children’s social participation in-group settings, Parten (1932) found that children are social in their play and that the level of social play in which they engage in is connected to their age and maturation (Johnson et al., 2005). Parten’s (1932) research revealed six levels of social play: unoccupied behavior, onlooker behavior,

solitary play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play (Sluss, 2015). Other important work on children's social development includes Smilansky & Shefatya's (1990) work on children working through conflicts in play and the work of Elias and Berk (2002), who investigated social dramatic play and self-regulation. More recently, the work of Gray (2013), suggests that children need to play in order to develop the skills that are necessary to develop as healthy humans who have the ability to engage with others socially while satisfying their own social needs.

In this study, the findings indicate that Hispanic teacher candidates seem to believe that play is valuable to children's social development. In fact, its value towards this particular form of development was the most cited by the participants as they spoke about how they engaged in different forms of social play with family members, friends, neighbors and even pets. When asked about children's learning and development, participant one revealed:

“Mostly social...Linguistics...That's the reason why some kids are anti social; they won't go out and play. They keep to themselves. Language, I mean it helps every level of play. Even for myself, I mean I had to be social. My mom did not want for me to play football. I told her that I was a kicker only. I lied to her. In order for me to be social and to go out there I had to go play football, I had to lie to my mom. I remember the day she found out I wasn't a kicker I was actually out on the field (laughs)...” (TC #1)

In talking about his play experiences, participant one again contextualized his response when speaking about children's learning and development. The quote above clearly shows that he had made the connection to his own social development. As shown in the quote, he did this by

sharing how he had to lie to his mother in order to play, and he had to do this in order to socialize with his peers.

Again, the social aspect of play was always very present during the interview with participant three. Teacher candidate three shared many play memories including playing with neighbors, biking around the neighborhood, and she even shared her play experiences in Mexico. Similar to participant one, participant three also spoke about the how play aids social development. Furthermore, she also contextualized her response by making the association to how play is central for the development of autistic kids, which she claimed to be passionate about. She stated, “Yes, I love autistic kids, I mean to work with them, I have a lot of fun with them...” Then, in response to their development she articulated the following statement:

“...While playing, they [autistic children] are developing you know, their social skills, which most of them don’t have because they are autistic...” (TC #3)

Participant four believed that children develop socially through play as indicated by her response:

“...What do they get out of play...well...I think...socially they get... friends...umm...its a great way to make friends, they... I mean if you’re at a park you can usually make friends, oh lets go ride the bikes together...I think playing...umm...is good for social interaction for children... and...(TC #4)

While talking about her play experiences, participant ten was soft spoken and often smiled during the interview. She was engaged and interested, and afforded insightful information about her play in Mexico as well. As a child, participant ten shared that she enjoyed playing with her sisters, cousins and neighbors in Matamoros, Mexico. During the interview she spoke about how she loved to play “teacher” and “house” while socially engaged in play. When asked about

children's development in play she reported that social development definitely occurs while playing. During her interview she declared:

“Every time you play, you learn something. If you want to be the leader you have to be able to direct the play. You have to create the game and the rules. For example, sometimes I wanted to be the teacher but there were other kids who also wanted to be the teacher. So I learned to compromise, because it was not always I, I would let the other children make their own choices. And I would just follow along. So in play, they are learning to compromise and to take on different social roles, different perspectives. You do engage in a lot of physical activities because you do a lot of things. We would play with music and dance...” (TC #10)

Participant two spoke openly about her social play in the United States and in Mexico and noted differences in the types of play that were possible in each context. During her interview she stated that she enjoyed playing mainly in social groups as opposed to playing alone. She also mentioned that she had noticed that her play in the United States differed from her play in Mexico, mostly because her play in the United States consisted of fewer players. In thinking about her play, she recalled how in Austin, she would only see children playing on the slide or on the swing. According to participant two, these types of play structures limited the opportunities for social play with more players. Moreover, she shared that in Mexico, the play always involved many players and many opportunities to create their own rules. Regarding her play experiences she stated:

“There was a period of two years where I lived in Austin. There I do remember playing in school because memories of play in school, I don't really have... Because in Austin besides physical education, we had our playground time or

recess time. And so there I would like very much to play on the tire swing or I don't remember what else there was but I remember that we would get together in groups and we would play our own invented games and it's what we would play..." (TC #2)

Furthermore, when talking about children's development teacher candidate two said that:

"Aprenden a valerse por si mismos,...aprenden a ser amigos..." (TC #2)

Translation:

"They learn to take care of themselves, they learn to make friends..."(TC #2)

Briefly stated, as shown through these quotes, social development was one of the aspects of development that emerged as valuable for the participants. In this regard, participants' responses indicate that they believe that play is valuable for fostering children's social development.

Playing is Valuable for Cognitive Development. Participants also spoke about the value of cognitive development in play. The value of play for cognitive development is evident in the literature as indicated by Bergen (2002), Hirsh-Pasek et al., (2009), Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2006) and other researchers. In particular, the value of children's social-dramatic play or make-believe play has been well documented in terms of development (Vygotsky, 1967). For example, according to Johnson et al., (2005), the work of Smilansky (1968, 1990) and Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) was significant in showing that socio-dramatic play helped children make connections between experiences that seemed unrelated. More recently, the research of Bodrova & Leong (2005), also found that complex make-believe play allowed for rich language and higher mental functions in young children. The value of play for children's cognitive development has also been recognized by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2007).

Accordingly, participants in this study, believed that play was valuable for cognitive development. When talking about the value of play to children's development, teacher candidate three remarked:

“...You also have to use your head, the cognitive development. You have to think you know, most of the time whenever you are playing...” (TC #3)

In a similar way, when participant one was asked whether he believed that play helps with other areas of development besides the social domain which he initially talked about, he gave the following statement regarding children's development:

“Cognitively yeah... I mean they start thinking about different situations that occur and they have to analyze the situation. Then the social, when stuff happens you have to figure a way out of that situation. Whether it is regular ed. or special ed. Cognitively, you need to play. Play is the key to everything. Without play you cant' have anything else...” (TC #1)

Although teacher candidate four initially talked about the social aspect of development, she then discussed how she believed that play was also valuable in terms of cognitive development in terms of imaginative and creative play. She articulated that:

“...Besides social interaction...umm...I'd say creativity also cause they...they...like with play, they can do whatever they want to...they use their imagination and they can expand their world they can expand their play because...umm...and it shows how creative they are, like if I see like my sorority sister's daughter like say “oh I'm in a space shuttle” I remember once oh and “I'm going to be an alien” and I was like what (laughs)...I didn't know she knew aliens, what like an alien was but it shows how creative they can be, just by, cause

she lives in a normal little apartment and so it's like this girl is like pretending to be in space and it shows how creative children can be and...it just like wow, like I didn't know she knew what an alien was you know, and how...how much imagination how big their imagination is of such a small child...I think that's great... already inquiring within herself about play..." (TC #4)

Teacher candidate nine also spoke about the cognitive abilities needed to create rules to play. In terms of development, participant nine communicated that:

"...A lot of problem solving. Like that's the main thing because they come up with their own rules...so problem solving is a big part to for me..." (TC #9)

Findings for this study suggest that participants consider that play is valuable for cognitive development as indicated by the excerpts presented above.

Playing is Valuable for Learning. The value of play for learning is well documented in the literature (Pellegrini, 2011; Piaget, 1951/1962; Sandberg & Heden, 2011). In this study, participants believed that play should be included in school settings such as the classroom. In talking about play during the interview, each of the participants spoke about the different ways in which play is valuable to children's learning. For example, while organizing their definitions of play, participants would often link their definition to some type of learning outcome.

Significantly, during our conversation about play in school and whether he believed that children learned through play, I asked participant one the following question, "Would you say that play equals learning"? In response to this question, participant one responded with the following statement:

"Without play you can't have learning, you can't have social, you can't have linguistics. It all goes hand-in-hand" (TC #1)

Correspondingly, when talking about children's learning participant two said that:

“Aprenden muchas cosas, aprenden a ser independientes, a depender en si mismos, a que no tienen que depender de mami, que no te va a dirgigir a donde ir a valerse por si mismos,...aprenden a ser amigos...” (TC #2)

Translation:

“They learn many things, they learn to be independent, to depend on themselves, that they can't depend on mommy, that she cannot direct where they need to go, to take care of themselves, they learn to make friends...” (TC #2)

Similarly, participant four expressed how she believed that children learn through play.

She stated the following:

“In play you, you gain a lot because without even knowing it through play children can learn...umm...you can like trick them to learning (laughs) but if you make it fun...I mean learning should always be fun because it...it's like you're playing and they don't even know they're learning but it helps them memorize...yep...//**so they don't even know they are learning what they are learning...?**//u huh...yes” (TC #4)

Teacher candidate eight again provided a lengthy explanation in describing her beliefs in reaction to play and learning. She stated:

“Oh my god so much...so much if it's used right, I mean they learn social skills, they learn ahh interaction with other people, they learn how to respect, how to share, how to...umm...have fun...have fun I mean besides the actual physical learning, learning how to kick, learning how to catch, learning how to run and whatever they're doing you know like cooking, how to care for a child whenever

they grow up it can also be learned through play...yeah they play mommies and daddies...how to be responsible, you need to have a job, you need to... you need to know they are going to have to eat, that you need to have a house all those things...so all of those things are all learned through play if you know how to guide them right...//**so basically would you say that you can teach anything through play/with play...?** //yes...yes...//ok...//firm believer of that (giggles)...//firm believer of that... **ok...**” (TC #8)

Despite the challenges that she faced as child in playing in outdoor settings, teacher candidate nine believed that play was useful for children’s learning. She articulated that:

“I think they learn everything during play. A lot of problem solving. Like that is the main thing because they come up with their own rules. There own like things and they learn how to share or how to work independently...so problem solving is a big part of play for me I think, and also like their fears, like they are just um like how can I say this, their fears, like one of my nephews he’s like oh he gets all dirty but the other one is like me, this is what concerns me, the most that I see myself in him when I was younger...So that is why I’m pushing with my all because my childhood was very limited. Like my parents were like oh but go outside and then I wouldn’t want to and they would be like oh ok, that’s fine, so they didn’t really push me...” (TC #9)

In a similar way, participant ten spoke about how children learn something through play. In response to the questions that I asked about play and its value in learning, participant ten stated the following words:

“Children always learn something through play....In play you learn different things without realizing that you are learning// **you are saying that through play they learn but**// Yes that is what I am saying, that they learn something. If it is something that involves manipulatives the children learn depending, they may learn to count, history, anything// **Is there anything that you cannot learn through play?** // You always learn something in play” (TC #10)

It should be noted again that the data presented here reveals that teacher candidates who took part in this study seem to believe that children learn through play as indicated by the quotes pulled from participants’ transcripts.

Playing is Also Valuable for Children With Special Needs. Research on play and its potential role on development is well founded (Pellegrini, 2011) in the literature; however, research on the benefits of play for children with special needs is not as well established (Hess, 2006). Because several of the participants in this study were seeking degrees in special education (see table 3.2), the topic of the value of play for children with special needs surfaced although I did not intentionally ask any questions pertaining specifically to children with any type of special needs. Consequently, in explaining their understanding of play in relation to development, several participants contextualized their response with their experiences with children who have a special need. Regarding learning and development, participant three stated the following:

“I didn’t necessarily think that it was, I mean I think it is important but I didn’t really think that it was um, it was really necessary I guess for students, for kids to develop but I mean now that I have been in school and based on my observations. Um for example I went to Pilgrim Elementary. It is a life skills, no it is not a life skills, it is an autistic unit and the teacher mentioned that um you know that it is

extremely necessary for the kids to have at least I want to say 30 minutes of play. They call, they have a different name for it// **Play therapy maybe?** // Sensory play...she calls it sensory play and she is like you know...and she told me based on my years of experience, I have seen a big change in allowing these children to play amongst each other and you know they actually learn and you know once they get back to work um they are more focused on their work, on whatever they are doing. You know, they try to work better//**So in other words; you are saying that after they play, they are more prepared to go back?** //Yes, they are more prepared. But also while playing they are developing and you know their social skills, which most of them don't have because they are autistic. You know they start to talk to each other, or like tapping you know one another and it is just fun to look at them...even if they are autistic, they still engage in play, and it is fun to see them. Like they will mimic each other. Like one of them that is severely autistic he bites his lips very hard. If you look at him you think "oh my gosh he is hurting himself"... So there is another other kid that likes to tease him playing around and mimicking him and so they start laughing. He gets a little mad but then he smiles..." (TC #3)

As indicated above, participant three offered insightful information in her response. Of significance was that she highlighted that prior to taking the environment course with Professor Dubai, she had not considered how play was necessary for learning or development. Consistently, this was a response that was expressed by participants. Teacher candidate three also explained that prior to Dr. Dubai's class, she believed that play was only meant to be out of school. Moreover, during the interview, by articulating her thoughts, as Vygotsky (1986)

proposes, teacher candidate three was also able to make the connection that children with special needs learn and develop through play, as do children who do not have special needs.

Furthermore, she talked about how she had done many hours of observations in a special education unit prior to taking Dr. Dubai's course. Expressly, she talked about how she had observed how the teacher in this unit had integrated sensory play. Yet, at the time, for some reason she thought that these play strategies were just for children with special needs. Thus, it was not until Dr. Dubai's course that she was able to make the connection and see the value of play for all children's development. She also commented that until she talked about this experience (during the interview), she was able to make reorganize her understanding of play (Vygotsky, 1986).

Participant one also spoke about children's development in terms of children with special needs, and particularly drew on a play experience that he had with a student with special needs. He began by attempting to provide me with the typical characteristics of a student such as the one he was describing since I was not familiar with this type of special need. He stated:

“...Um Short bushy eyebrows like a uni-brow//**ok yes**// small face, usually one of their limbs is (inaudible)... And we have one of those and um to keep her awake and keep her going she grabs a book with little balls and she throws them at me. And I'll throw it back at her and she'll go and grab it and throw it and the goal is to keep on moving. **And she likes it?** She likes it... You can tell she likes it...she'll go over and picks her hands up so that I can lift her and I put her down and keep her going...” (TC #1)

As shown through the quotes presented above, participants seemed to believe that play was valuable for all children's learning and development, including those with special needs.

Playing is Valuable as a Cultural Activity. Analysis of the data also suggested that play was valuable as a cultural activity for participants (Gaskins, 2014). As mentioned previously, teacher candidates constantly engaged in play with family members, peers and neighbors, and their play typically involved several children playing together in different spaces (Gaskins, 2014; Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Upon closer examination of the data, findings suggest that play is seen as a cultural activity where children get to express their own interpretation of the world (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). For example, teacher candidate two stated:

“They learn about their culture, I imagine because well, for example, I grew up in a culture where I would almost always play in Matamoros. Well they were different games in my opinion. In comparison to when I grew up in Austin nobody knew what *la vibora de la mar* was (snake of the sea)...” (TC #2)

Participant two also commented on how play is a cultural activity that allows children to learn about their culture. She commented:

“...aprenden sobre su cultura...”(TC #2)

“...they learn about their culture...(TC #2)

Analysis of the data revealed that participants often engaged in play that connected to their culture. For example, several of the participants talked about their play as it related to domestic activities or social roles. An example, of this was participant eight who spoke about playing *a las tienditas*, (stores) and made mention of the local stores available in her community which served as a template for her play with her sisters and neighbors. Also, some participants gave different examples about how they pretended to be mommies, teachers, doctors, and even secretaries during their childhood play. Yet, other participants talked about how they pretended to be Power Rangers. In terms of what participants played with, some spoke about their play with

natural objects such as mud, bugs, and anything they could find outside, while others spoke about their play with more commercialized items such as Barbies, Ninja Turtles, trucks, and Legos.

What was also compelling was that eight out of the ten participants who took part in this study revealed that they played as children in two very diverse countries. In this light, they spoke about the difference in the types of play that happened within each particular social cultural context (Mexico vs. United States). A difference, for example was in the play opportunities that were available. For instance, participant two spoke about how the children in Austin did not know all the *rimas* (*rhymes*) or traditional games like *la vibora de la mar* (the snake from the sea), *voto*, (I vote) or *Matarili*, amongst others, as did the children from Matamoros. Teacher candidate two also observed that play in Mexico was more social and often consisted of more participants who engaged in creating their own “*juegos inventados*” (invented games) and created their own rules. This finding corroborates with Vygotsky’s (1978) notion that children create and work through social rules through social interaction and in play with other children. Like Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1951/1962) also recognized the value of games with rules. Games with rules for Piaget (1951/1962) can be described as:

“Sensory-motor combinations (races, marbles, ball games etc.), or intellectual combinations (cards, chess, etc.), in which there is competition between individuals (otherwise rules would be useless) and which are regulated either by a code handed down from earlier generations or by temporary agreement” (p. 144).

Participants also noticed that play was always outside in Mexico and it was less supervised, although there was always someone who was watching. Consequently, these participants felt that their play was more liberated or free, less restricted, more social, and safer

in Mexico as opposed to the United States. For example when asked about where she played as a child, participant three provided the following response:

“...Outside... at my neighbor’s house or my friend’s house. Umm... we would sometimes go to Matamoros and we would play over there. I don’t have a lot of cousins my age. I probably have like... I would say like 2 or 3 that are my age... And they umm... they used to live in Matamoros and they moved up to Houston so...//**Was the play different in Matamoros than from here?** //Yes. (Laughs)
How was it different? //For some reason we wouldn’t care like if we got dirty or like what we would play with. I don’t know... I would see it a little bit different. I can’t really explain how different but it was a little bit different// **Can you explain**//There wasn’t much like special places to go to and play, over there it was just outside in the yard. But umm... I don’t know like I felt a little bit more, FREE (laughs). **Ok, more free...**// Yes a little bit more free than here. Here you have to watch out you know when you are small for the cars and the street and everything and over there it was more of an open space. There wasn’t many cars passing by you know in the neighborhood so...// (TC #3)

In order to further validate participants’ shifting beliefs in the value of play in education, I specifically asked participants if they believed that play should be part of the classroom. Consequently, each of the participants in this study confirmed through their verbal responses that play should be part of the classroom and its curriculum. Of significance, is that they indicated that they plan on integrating play in their classrooms as future teachers. Thus, participants’ responses revealed that they see play as a valuable tool in school settings. For example,

participant one was first asked if play should be included in the classroom and he responded by saying the following:

“Yes because it is one of the key elements for the classroom to function. You have to play. I mean...play like I said before leads to the social and self-worth which leads to jobs and all that...” (TC #1)

When asked if she believed that it was important to include play in the classroom, participant nine stated:

“Yes, because of everything that I said already, like it develops the problem solving, and it develops all their senses, their motor skills, because they are playing so I think it’s essential for kids to have their own time and just have something that is not with rules with the teacher directing the students like, yes of course, there has to be rules but they get to create their own rules and they also need that freedom to enjoy school...” (TC #9)

Similarly, participant seven stated:

“Yes, yes, they need to get that energy out to get more positive energy and they socialize, they develop, I don’t want to say the name of the school but they don’t have a playground and kids are not allowed to play on that thing anymore//**because it is not safe?** //it is not safe...they need a playground and I even told them this time we have to make some fund raisers for that you know...”(TC #7)

As explained at length above, findings suggest that participants’ beliefs about the value of play have shifted from being valuable in everyday life to also being valuable in education for

children's learning and development. The following section discusses participants' beliefs about the value of the teacher during children's play.

Believing in the Value of the Active Role of the Teacher During Children's Play

Although several studies have investigated teachers' beliefs about their role in children's play (e.g., Bennett et.al, 1997, Jones & Reynolds, 1992), few studies have explored teacher candidates' beliefs on this topic. Consequently, Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play, was also investigated in this study. Findings for this study suggest that virtually all of the participants believed that the teacher plays a valuable role in children's play. Data analysis suggests that participants believe that teachers need to be actively involved in children's play. Although their ideas about the level of involvement varied from participant to participant, teacher candidates considered that teachers could be involved in two main ways, mainly, by actually engaging in their play, or by actively observing their play. Seen in this light, an important theme that arose was that the teacher plays an active role in children's play. In the sections that follow I explicate the two categories that led to the construction of this theme.

Believing in Facilitating Learning Through Play. Every participant spoke about the value of the teacher in children's play. The findings indicate that participants believe that the teacher should foster children's play by taking on the different active roles. For example, some participants believed that the teacher should be a facilitator and guide children's play, while others agree with the latter and also believe that the teacher should play with students, as stated below:

“I believe the best teachers are teachers that interact. If you are just sitting back watching your classroom then you are not a teacher, you are just an observer.

Teachers are... that is why you are teaching. You have to show students how to play, where to play, what is proper, what to do, what not to do. That's why you are the instructor..." (TC #1)

The role of the teacher as a facilitator is based on Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) notion of scaffolding, in which the teacher mediates the child's learning. As such, the role of the teacher is then to scaffold the child so that he/she can advance to the next level of thought. As Samaras (2002) reminds us, "This interaction could lead the learner toward higher-level processes, which would in turn, produce changes in the learners' nature" (p. 42). In this case, by facilitating their play, as proposed by participant one, the teacher creates a zone of proximal development for more complex or advanced forms of play.

Additionally, the participants' responses confirm what Jones and Reynolds (2011) affirm about the teacher as a "Doer". According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), "Teachers don't however, only sit and watch play. They also make play possible" (p. 20). Again, according to these constructivist views, it is the teacher who creates and extends the play opportunities for her students. In addition, participant three also commented on the teacher's role in play and stated:

"To get involved...umm...I think it's fun...I think it's fun for children when adults start playing with them, like I had a blast when my uncle was playing with us, like it was so fun because he was an adult you know..." (TC #4)

Furthermore, participant eight discussed at length the significance of the role of the teacher in play. She said the following when asked about the role of the teacher in play:

"A very important one, you have to be able to be smart enough to incorporate whatever course, whatever teaching you want them to learn through the play because if you include the play you'll be smarter because those kids will love you,

respect you more and learn everything you tell them, you teach them through play...//**u huh...**//than if you just like we said before do ditto sheets, you finish one and then do this other one, that is not going to work, they are not going to respect you, they are not going to learn anything important from you, it's easier to have a student come in expecting... oh what is she gonna have today, what is she gonna do today with us, than students thinking...oh here we go again...//**yes...**//you know, ahh I have to go again I'm going to be sitting down doing paperwork and then...I would rather have a student desperate to come in here and...and...in my classroom and see what I have new...//**right...**//what new animals, what new thing I'm going to teach them what am I going to do, even if it means me dressing up you know...//**right...**//it means like...and...then//**being playful?...**//Yes, being playful...and they'll respect me more and they will probably listen more to me doing that that than just teaching straight out of the book...//**right...ok...**”(TC #8)

Teacher candidate eight clearly made connections to play and learning in talking about the role of the teacher. For her, the teacher plays a significant role in using play wisely in the classroom. In addition, when asked if the teacher needed to be involved in children's play, she responded with the following statement:

“... you have to be a participant in their play, you have to because you want to make sure that they are learning, make sure that they are safe and then any little problem that might erupt from that you can fix it right there and then as if you're on the side not paying attention and not//**so you need to be paying attention...**//yeah you need to be active...you need to be watchful you know at

everything that is going on//**so you think that the teacher can extend the children's play or the level of play or whatever they are playing that the teacher can come in and extend that play?...am I making sense...//yes... yes...yes you can because that is why you need to be involved...//the teacher be involved...?//so you can see if there's a possibility you know this group is going to grasp more then go ahead and extend it, get in there make a little bit more...//add something...make a comment...?//u huh make a comment...just a little something... just to spark the interest...**" (TC #8)

The quotes illustrated above correspond to Jones & Reynolds' (2011) work on the teacher's role in children's play. The beliefs of these participants align with what Jones and Reynolds (2011) coined "teacher as the player" where the teacher sustains children's play while simultaneously responding to their ideas (p. 41). They also correspond to the teacher's role as "Planner" where the teacher plans for children's play. As Jones and Reynolds (2011) remind us, "Teachers discover children's skills and interests during observations of play. In the role of planner, a teacher may focus on the environment as it supports play or the play scripts themselves" (p. 96). Seen in this light, participants appear to believe that teachers need to actively participate in children's play whether it is through facilitating play through different means or through actually becoming one of the players in their student's play.

Believing in Keeping Children Safe During Play. As previously indicated, participants were concerned about the safety of students during play although virtually every participant believed that children needed to play, and that it was important. Additionally, participants spoke about the different roles that they would actively take depending on the individual situation. However, participants expressed the need to keep children safe during play. Regarding the value

of the role of the teacher in children's play, participant nine believed that safety was important and stated:

“I think it is supervising, of course supervising the safety, but also, like kind of giving the students the idea but for them to develop the idea by themselves... like I do see myself outside. I am doing it right now. Not being a teacher yet but, like I do see myself outside. Also like for the teacher to have fun. It's not just about like, you know, but you do need to be like I would say...” (TC #9)

Similarly, participant three also had some concerns about the role of the teacher as a supervisor that ensures the safety of the students. Additionally, she stated that children need their freedom during play although she would like to be part of their play. Regarding the role of the teacher, participant three articulated that:

“I think its always fun to be part of their play but I mean you also have to give them their freedom to explore on their own//**ok**// Umm... when they are in school, as a teacher I think yes they always have to be, kind of be supervised but not on them like what are you doing you shouldn't be doing this or that. Choose a particular area where you know that they are going to be safe and then you are not going to be on them all the time and um so you can let them to explore and talk to each other and play with whatever they find depending on the area...But yes I don't like for teachers to be always constantly like on kids, What you are doing? You are doing this wrong, no you are not supposed to play, like put these away, I don't know. I think it's just um, how can I say this? //**So basically give them some time to explore as long as they are safe is what you are saying?**// Yes,

yes, because if not, the student is just going to be like holding back and not going to develop as they should socially...” (TC #3)

As suggested by these interview excerpts, teacher candidates seem to believe that the teacher needs to be active in children’s play. Participants in the study also spoke constantly about their role in keeping children safe and their responsibility as a supervisor and facilitator during children’s play.

As I have argued above in great detail, findings for this study suggest that participants appear to value play. As such, the following sections bring closure to this chapter by proposing a theoretical understanding grounded in the data of this study of what possibly shaped teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of play.

Construction of Hispanic Teacher Candidates’ Beliefs About the Value of Play

As indicated by the findings presented above, participants played with a conceptualization of play in order to make meaning of the phenomenon of play. Of significance is that participants defined play in multiple parts and in line with what is found with the literature (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; Gray, 2013). In this study, findings indicate that participants believed in the value of play in their everyday life and also reveal that now that they have experienced play as part of their teacher education program, they also believe in the value of play in education. For example, data analysis suggests that teacher candidates appear to value play in children’s learning and development and that participants’ perceive the role of the teacher in play as valuable. Significantly, this data served as the foundation for this study.

Thus, coming to an understanding of what shaped teacher candidates’ beliefs about play during this study was difficult for me as the researcher due to the complexity of the phenomenon that is play (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Eberle, 2014; Johnson et al., 2015). In order to explain what

influenced these beliefs, and how these beliefs were possibly created, in the subsequent sections, I propose an interpretive theoretical explanation, grounded in the data collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Charmaz, 2014). As Charmaz (2014) reminds us, in an interpretive study, “The theory depends on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it” (p. 239).

From this view, examination of the data revealed that teacher candidate’s beliefs about play were constructed by several interconnected and dynamic factors that have continued to develop as a process over time. Therefore, not only is the initial “what” question answered in this study, but, this theoretical understanding includes my attempt to answer the “how” of this study, as proposed by Charmaz (2014) and Corbin & Strauss (2015).

Constructing Beliefs About the Value of Play Through Multiple and Interrelated Influences as a Dynamic Process

In what follows, I begin by proposing that participants’ beliefs are shaped by their play histories, which are socially and culturally constructed (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Play Histories

Data analysis suggests that a major influence on teacher candidates’ beliefs about play is their play history (Vygotsky, 1978). As I will discuss in detail in the sections that follow, participants’ experiences as children and now as adults seemed to have laid a solid foundation for their beliefs about play. Specifically, I further suggest that participants’ play histories were constructed by their personal play experiences and their educational play experiences (Vygotsky, 1986). As Dewey (1938) reminds us, “Every experience is a moving force” (p. 38). And he further explained that it is the value of the experience that leads to further development. What also surfaced during the analysis is that these experiences happened within a social and cultural context.

Personal Experiences. In terms of participants' personal experiences, examination of data uncovered that participants value children's play. In conceptualizing play, they defined play in multiple ways that showed that play needs to be interlaced with joyfulness and freedom, essentially, their definitions appeared to be emotionally driven. The participants' recollections of play demonstrated that they had positive experiences of play during their childhood, which included: active engagement in different forms of play, playing with family, neighbors and friends, and, playing in diverse play spaces, including two different countries (United States and Mexico). Each of the participants was asked, "Where do you think your ideas or beliefs about play come from? Each of the participants spoke about how their ideas about play began as children with the interactions that occurred with family members. Participant one stated:

"I could go back all the way back to my mom. My mom and dad they put that in me. You have to play. You have to be social. You can't be quiet. I mean I come from a loud family so you have to be loud..." (TC #1)

Participants also stated that as adults, they continue to play, although some participants expressed that they play every day while others articulated that they play as often as life permits. However, they each spoke to how they are making a more conscious effort to play because of what they have recently learned in Dr. Dubai's class. Despite challenges, and perceived barriers to play, every participant played as a child and continues to play as an adult, and plans to continue to play. As such, these findings suggest that the teacher candidates who took part in this study perceive play as valuable.

Educational Experiences. During the interviews, participants spoke about how they engaged in play in school when they were children. Particularly, teacher candidates spoke about how they played in school during recess time. Of significance in this study was that each

participant stated positive comments about the usefulness of play in the classroom and indicated that they plan to integrate play in their class as future teachers. Additionally, participants commented that they do not see children play outdoors during recess (Sutterby, Pei-San, & Thornton, 2015). As confirmed by Sutterby et al., (2015), “Recent research suggests that children are not active during school hours” (p. 142). Although participants perceived future barriers to play, this new understanding showed that they were trying to make sense of what they learned in view of the current educational climate, which appears to be leaving little time to integrate play in the classroom (Almon & Miller, 2011).

As previously discussed, for Vygotsky (1986), everyday and classroom experiences afford different opportunities in the development of concept formation about play. For this study, what this means is that participants used their spontaneous concepts (from their personal experiences) to be able to use existing knowledge as a foundation to develop scientific concepts about play. As stated by Samaras (2002), “Scientific or formal knowledge originates in everyday knowledge” (p. 81). As Vygotsky (1986) reminds us, scientific concepts need to evolve in educational settings and are grounded in the social, cultural, and historical context, which mediated their experiences (p. 148).

Essentially, findings suggest that participants everyday experiences and educational experiences fused and allowed teacher candidates’ to re-conceptualize their beliefs about play (see figure 4.2) from play being important for everyday life to an educational understanding that play has value for children’s development and learning. Although this understandings is very new, the findings suggest that participants do believe that play has value for children’s learning and development. For example, when participant three was asked about where her ideas about play came from she stated:

“I mean barely from Dr. Dubai’s class. Because I mean like I said, I know play is you know important for all of us but I didn’t really think it was super important for kids, or for students//**So before Dr. Dubai’s class you saw play as?** // As um, I don’t know, like a release of energy maybe...just being fun, Mhmmm, but now how Dr. Dubai like explained it and you know it’s important you know, for development or this or that, I didn’t really see it like that. I just saw it like yes it’s ok and its necessary and it’s important to have fun once in a while but that’s it. Like I didn’t really see it as necessary. So it pretty much came from her because I mean other than her I don’t think anybody else had um like encouraged the importance of play...” (TC #3)

Like participant three, most of the teacher candidates talked about how they did not see play as valuable in education prior to their teacher education program. Interestingly, they credited their newfound knowledge about the value of play to Dr. Dubai’s class. Collectively, participants credited this new understanding to the diverse learning opportunities that were afforded by different assignments such as discussion board entries, viewing videos on play and reflective papers. However, a significant finding that emerged from the data was the value of the service learning community play day. Data analysis suggests that this experience helped teacher candidates to re-conceptualize their understanding of play in terms of its value to children’s learning and development. This concept is explained in the following segment.

Re-conceptualizing play through a service learning play day. It has been argued to this point that teacher candidates had positive experiences or what Dewey (1938) referred to “educative experiences” with play as part of their everyday lives (both as children and as adults), which possibly helped them form a solid foundation about the value of play. Additionally, I

have also discussed that data indicates that participants benefitted from engaging in diverse assignments and activities that integrated play as pedagogy.

Seen in this light, a significant finding in this study was the valuable contribution that the service learning community play day made toward the participants' beliefs about play. Data suggests that engaging in the play day experience allowed teacher candidates to combine what they had learned in the course and essentially to re-conceptualize their understanding of play. Findings indicate that participants viewed working with others in a community event such as the play day, as a valuable experience (Seban, 2013; Smith & Sobel, 2010). As proposed by Vygotsky (1960/1981), people learn with others in situated contexts through "...participation in authentic cultural activities" which are essential for development (Samaras, xxi). Samaras & Gismondi (1998) further emphasized, "Vygotskian theory states that in order for learning to become internalized, mediation must occur during the actual problem-solving and joint activity or shared task definition with others (Vygotsky, 1960/1981, as cited by Samaras & Gismondi, 1998).

With this said, it should be noted that participants enrolled in the environment course were required to identify a social problem, which in this case, the problem identified by the students was children's right to play. Participants then had to plan a community play day in collaboration with their team, with the rationale that they were providing a service to the community (IPA/USA, 2009). Then, participants actually took part in the play day event where they played with children and also, observed children and their families playing. Finally, participants had to reflect on what they learned from their participation in the play day. Collectively, participants gave credit to this event as an important experience in their

understanding of the educational value of children's play. Below is what participant two wrote regarding her experience during play day. She wrote:

“Play Day was a positive experience for me in every single aspect. I had the opportunity to put in practice the message I was trying to deliver which were the benefits of play. In any other class, I would have disliked the idea of being three hours reading or doing worksheets but being there in the zoo for three hours was fun and I learned and enjoyed every single minute of those three-and-a-half hours in the zoo. Especially during the first years of a child's life, play is the best way a child can learn and develop in all areas physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally. Even though this was not my first service learning, this was the first time I had to talk and interact with parents. This experience made me realize how difficult it is for the children to engage and participate in activities and when it comes to their education, this lack of support from their parents may be the cause of the children not succeeding in school...” (TC #2)

Again, findings suggest that the factors mentioned above, could be considered important for the teacher candidates' re-conceptualization of play. As previously discussed, data suggests that a significant change in the teacher candidates' beliefs was in how they appeared to make the distinction between children's play in everyday life, mainly outside of the classroom and children's play inside of the classroom (Reifel, 1999).

The other major change was in terms of the educational value of play, primarily, that teacher candidates now seemed to believe that play was valuable for children's learning and development as opposed to their prior belief that play was only valuable for having fun in everyday life.

To return to the former perspective, teacher candidates' beliefs began to take shape in childhood as they played with friends, family and neighbors, which in turn, provided a solid foundation for the meaning they made of play. Then, data revealed that participants continued to play as adults, although some participants claimed to play on a regular basis and others commented that they play as often as life permits, teacher candidates clearly continued to play as adults. As adults, participants were enrolled in a teacher education program in South City, where the multiple and interrelated experiences afforded in class allowed them to re-conceptualize play essentially by active participation in their learning within their community (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1986). Participants credited this re-conceptualization mainly to one course and to one professor. When asked if they had learned about play in any other course, teacher candidates explained that although some of the professors did encourage cooperative learning or "hands-on" activities, none of them integrated active participation in play or emphasized the value of play pedagogy as did Dr. Dubai in this particular course. Findings also suggest that part of their re-conceptualization of play also includes participants' thinking about their future role in play as future teachers.

Essentially, teacher candidates' beliefs about play appeared to have been influenced by multiple and interrelated factors which were constructed by the process of bridging their past, present, and future experiences. These experiences appeared to have served as filters in their re-conceptualization of play. This process is explained in figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2: Constructing Beliefs About the Value of Play Through Multiple and Interrelated Influences as a Dynamic Process



As proposed by Charmaz (2012), I studied the data and then asked, “...What analytic story do these codes tell? As such, I created the concept of “Constructing Beliefs about the Value of Play Through Multiple and Interrelated Influences as a Dynamic Process” as described in figure 4.2. Moreover, as shown above, figure 4.2 illustrates that participants’ re-conceptualized play through the process of the fusion of educational and everyday experiences within a social, cultural, and historical context and how these elements coalesced. In this light, this figure represents an abstract theoretical interpretation of the different and interrelated factors that appeared to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates’ beliefs about play. Significantly, participants seemed to have reached this re-conceptualization of play by also bridging past experiences with play, with their present, and future experiences with play. In sum, figure 4.2

illustrates my interpretive theoretical understanding of what seemed to have shaped teacher candidates' beliefs about play and also, how these beliefs were possibly formed. Seen in this light, Charmaz (2014) reminds us that:

“An alternative definition of theory emphasizes *understanding* rather than explanation. Proponents of this definition view theoretical understanding as abstract and interpretive; the very understanding gained from the theory rests on the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon. Interpretive theories allow for indeterminacy rather than seek causality and give priority to showing patterns and connections rather than to linear reasoning” (p. 230).

As previously mentioned, virtually every participant spoke to how they learned about the value of play through their environment course. In this study, participants credited their professor, Dr. Dubai, with developing their educational understanding of play. For example, participant one credits Dr. Dubai with broadening his horizons in terms of play pedagogy. He stated:

“Well yeah right now. Yes I mean. Right now Dr. Dubai... you know broadened my horizons. They were open but she kind of like opened the door and showed me a different way//ok// And now I look at a classroom and I can pick it apart just the way she does. Colors, open areas, the scenes, the centers. What's better for the child//ok She is basically it. Because all the other classes I see them as the learning of the rules, the law of being in special these special education units. It's all about law in all the courses.

When asked about whether she had learned about play through her education courses participant eight responded:

“I...I have learned in some of them but I’ve got to...my hat’s off to Dr. Dubai...I mean I just took that class and she definitely puts a big emphasis on play, I mean I could see it on her and it makes you open your eyes and realize how important it is to play, like I said I’ve learned how can I incorporate a course or a lesson with a game or something and like that but the importance of play itself I think I learned it a lot more this last semester//**was there a specific assignment or project that really like brought everything into the big “a huh” moment?**// that mud day...the play day...the play day really made me realize, wow this is important...”
(TC #8)

Teacher candidate seven talked about how she re-conceptualized play. She stated:

“Yes because now I am more conscious about how important play is in this part of the children. That it is not just for fun. But it is also good for brain development physical development, you know for your arms and legs...coordination and if you notice they are playing in the swing they are playing on the slide okay now I’m next, so they are thinking...”(TC #7)

Teacher candidate four also commented on how important play is. She remarked:

“I mean cause I actually never knew how important play was till this class like I thought...I grew up thinking play was a privilege, you know like umm...like my parents said “I’m not going to let you play with your dolls if you don’t do this or whatever”//**it was a reward after...**//yeah...after whatever I had to do, it was a reward...but now like after I was in this class...wow...like, if only my parents

knew (giggles) like I had to play, you never let me play all those times (both giggles) but I think that getting involved and playing with them I think would be great...” (TC #4)

She further stated:

“Yes, in Dr. Dubai’s class...umm...that’s the only class I think that I’ve taken so far that...uhh...that talks about play and how important it is...umm...and...I mean she explains it...I mean we mention play every class day, we talk about play all the time and...umm...(both giggle) and just how important it is, I mean I learned a lot from being in her class because like I said I grew up thinking like play was like a privilege, it was an award...umm...but I learned like wow...it’s like so much more than that...adults don’t know how important play is for their child and they treat it as nothing important when it really is...” (TC #4)

Regarding the play day, teacher candidate one commented:

“Play day at the zoo. The play day that was an experience. We had to interact with the kids but also with the parents. We had to try to get the parents involved. And some of the parents were like you approached them and it was like you had a disease or something and walked away from you, like almost ran//**Really?** // And you can tell a lot when the parents do that because they are the parents that how can I say this, are not too involved with their child...”(TC #1)

Participants also reflected on their play day experience and their responses indicated that they conceived this experience as positive. Teacher candidate three wrote:

“ I think the play day was very good for us as future teachers. I do also believe the zoo is an amazing way for teachers and children to learn from their environments.

I do love the fact that the groups of kids were so happy to see tigers and so easily wanting to play. I love the parents who were helpful to the teachers taking care of the students. Overall I'm glad I got to experience the play day and I hopefully one day as a teacher can get my class to go over for a play day..." (TC #3)

Again, the excerpts above confirm that the participants were able to re-conceptualize their understanding of play because of the experiences that were afforded to them through Dr. Dubai's course and in particular, what seems to have brought everything together was their participation in a service-learning community play day.

As noted earlier in this chapter, data reveals that participants' beliefs about play began to form from their own play experiences from the time they were children and continued to evolve as a social activity into their adulthood. Data analysis disclosed that there was a conceptual change in teacher candidates' understanding of play, particularly, after they took an early childhood education course, *The Environment and Early Childhood*.

Fundamentally, after learning about play through different mediums such as discussion boards, reflections, videos, and in particular, their participation in a service-learning play day, they were able to make the distinction between children's play outside of the classroom and children's play inside the classroom (Reifel, 1999). Most of the participants' responses indicated that prior to this course, they had not conceived of the idea of play inside the classroom with the exception of participant eight. However, data analysis suggests that this course caused a conceptual change in every participant, this being that play is not only important as a free activity out of school because it is fun, but that play is necessary for learning and development.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this study. The findings were organized into two major sections: (1) *Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play*, and, (2) *Construction of Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play*. Research questions one through four were addressed in the first section and question five was addressed in the subsequent section. The chapter concluded by presenting an interpretive theoretical explanation grounded in the data that explained teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play and what shaped these beliefs. Additionally, this theoretical interpretation attempts to, explain how these beliefs appeared to have been formed.

Consideration of the process of the fusion of personal and educational experiences within a social cultural and historical context where participants experienced play is essential to the understanding of how their beliefs were shaped. Findings also considered the impact that the experience of engaging in a service learning community play day made on teacher candidates' re-conceptualization about the value of children's play because it served as "an authentic cultural activity" which was mediated by professor Dubai, and through the collaboration with peers. The concluding chapter will present a discussion of the findings as well as implications and recommendations for application of these findings to research and practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

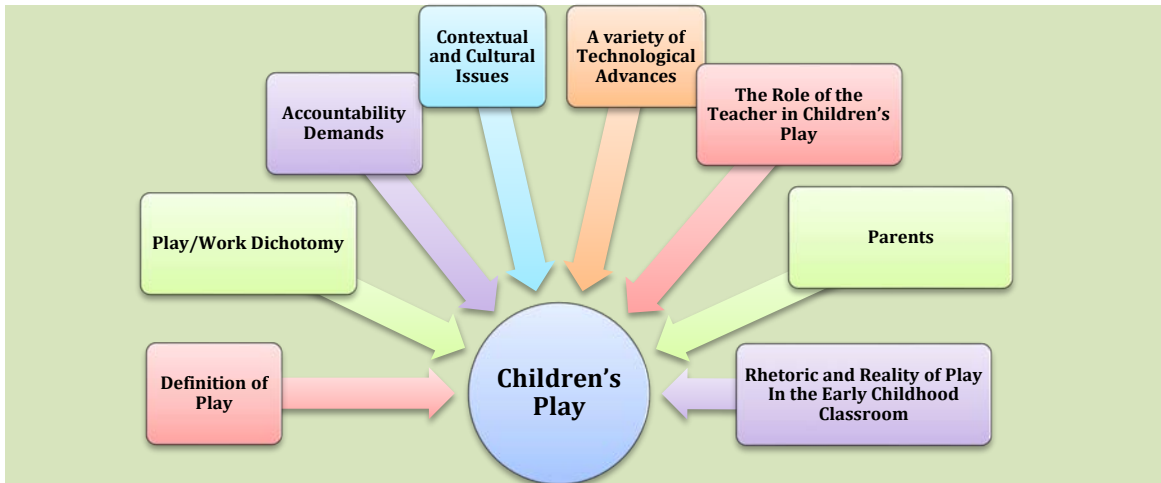
In this present study I explored the beliefs of ten Hispanic teacher candidates enrolled in a teacher education program in a Hispanic Serving University along the Texas-Mexico border. Intentionally, I begin this chapter with a summary of the study, which includes: the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, a review of its methodology and a summary of the major findings. To bring closure to this research, in the sections that follow, I draw conclusions from the findings by interweaving the necessary connective tissue from the literature that was surveyed during the different phases of this research. Immediately thereafter, I discuss the implications for research and practice and make recommendations for further research. Finally, I explicate the limitations of the study and provide my conclusions to this qualitative study.

Summary of the Study

Children's play has been a hallmark of early childhood due to its reported value in learning and development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; Chudacoff, 2011; Pellegrini, 2011). However, in this study, the literature revealed that there are many interrelated factors that are affecting the use of play as a pedagogical tool in the 21st century (Almon & Miller, 2011; Gray, 2014b; Miller & Almon, 2009). Figure 5.1 is presented to visually represent the diverse factors that have been shown to contribute to the decline of play in early childhood in the

United States according to the literature surveyed for this study (Almon & Miller 2011; Gray, 2013, 2014b, Frost, 2010, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005).

Figure 5.1: Multiple Factors Impacting the Decline of Play



Problem Statement, Purpose and Research Questions

Due to multiple and interrelated factors, as demonstrated in figure 5.1, Hispanic teacher candidates in South City have reportedly grappled with the challenges of making sense between the rhetoric and reality of the educational value of play. As the researcher of this study, I observed this problem while preparing teacher candidates in a teacher education program in South City. Through lectures and diverse projects, teacher candidates in South City University expressed that they often do not observe play as part of the early childhood classroom despite the national and global recognition that is given to play as a staple in children's learning and development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Johnson, 2014; Reifel, 2011, 2014). Because of the importance of play in children's learning and development and the continued challenges posed by the current educational climate in the United States, an examination of teacher candidates' beliefs should be required prior to their transition to in-service teaching.

Thus, the purpose of this present study was to explore Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development. Additionally, I sought to uncover what influences possibly shaped these beliefs and how these influences were conceivably shaped. The following research questions guided this study.

1. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play? Do they value play and if so, how and why?
2. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitutes play?
3. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development in early childhood education?
4. What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play?
5. What influenced Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play? How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play?

Review of the Methodology

As previously stated, in this study, I sought to explore teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play, and how these beliefs were shaped. This study was conducted in South City, a city that is found along the Texas-Mexico border. Participants were recruited from a Hispanic Serving university in South City. Initially, eight participants were recruited from two sections of a teacher education course titled, *The Environment and Early Childhood Education*. As the researcher of this study, I used purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2002) to recruit participants and I used the following criteria in the selection process: (1) participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Mexican-American, (2) participants were teacher candidates seeking a

bachelor degree in education or had earned a bachelor degree and were now pursuing an alternative education certificate to teach, (3) participants were selected because they were enrolled in a teacher education course in Texas which is considered a state that is driven by testing to meet accountability demands, and (4) participants were chosen because they were enrolled in a course that integrates play pedagogy. As the study advanced, two more participants were recruited to verify emerging themes through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). Significantly, I followed ethical guidelines set by the universities IRB that required that all ten participants sign a consent form prior to data collection and analysis.

Importantly, the methodology that was chosen was congruent with my ontological and epistemological beliefs about the nature of reality, mainly; an interpretive and social constructivist lens was used to underpin this qualitative study (Lincoln & Denzin, 2011). From this perspective, human beings' meaning-making is co-constructed through social life, primarily by mediated means (Vygotsky, 1978). To analyze and frame the findings of this study, I drew on the complementary work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Dewey (1938) and Nespors (1987). For example, Vygotsky's (1986) work was significant in interpreting the findings of this study because he recognized the value of experience as influential in shaping how humans think. Primarily, Vygotsky's (1986) research asserts that two forms of experiences mainly, everyday and classroom experiences work in concert to develop spontaneous and scientific concepts, which are mutually dependent and are grounded socially, culturally and historically (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). More importantly, it is through the process of this symbiotic relationship that people are able to advance their thoughts and their development (Vygotsky, 1986). Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education also served as a lens to interpret the findings for this study. Particularly, Dewey's (1938) notion of educative experiences, which he measured within the

principles of interaction and continuity, were also used to interpret findings. Similar to Vygotsky (1986), for Dewey (1938) educative experiences have the potential to lead to further development in human thinking. According to Dewey (1938) educative experiences thrive in social activity in community with others. The relevance of learning in community, that is in a social context, through mediated and purposeful experiences, is congruent with Vygotsky's (1986) concept of human thought, in which learning is essentially underpinned by its social and cultural context. Additionally, Nespor's (1987) theoretical framework on beliefs was also used to interpret the results of this research. Mainly, Nespor (1987) suggested that the four influences that work in concert to shape beliefs are: existential presumption, alternativity, affective and evaluative aspects, and episodic storage. Nespor's (1986) work was important in this study not only because of his notion that experiences shape beliefs but also, because he believed that the affective component, or the emotions or feelings that are attached to certain experiences are an essential component of the process of how a person comes to believe that something is valuable or important.

A qualitative methodology with constructivist grounded theory methods was used to collect and analyze data for this study. A constructivist grounded theory approach was congruent with the purpose of this study, which sought to explore teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play. In particular, for this study, I used the constructivist grounded theory version proposed by Charmaz (2014) that aims to construct an interpretive theoretical understanding of the studied phenomenon grounded on the researcher's interpretation of the data.

During this study, I collected three different types of data. The data consisted of intensive interviews, classroom and play day observations and two forms of documents. In line with constructivist theory methods, data collection and analysis was highly iterative and thus

happened concurrently throughout the duration of the study. The main source of data used for this study were the intensive interviews, and then the observations and documents were used to compare and verify findings. Moreover, I used several methods of analysis that are consistent with constructivist grounded theory methods as proposed by Charmaz (2014) mainly, open coding and focused coding were used to identify salient segments of meaning with the purpose of answering the research questions that guided this study. Additionally, the analysis of the data that was collected led me to construct a theoretical interpretation of the findings grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014).

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in this study, I used data triangulation by using participants' interviews as a main source of data and then data from observations and documents were again used as confirming evidence of the findings. Furthermore, I drew from the scholarship of three theorists as an additional method of triangulation. Finally, respondent validation was also used as a method to verify participants' responses during the interviews.

Summary of the Findings

Two major concepts emerged from the categories and themes that were constructed from data analysis in this study: (1) Valuing Play and, (2) Constructing beliefs about the value of play through multiple and interrelated influences as a dynamic process. As such, a summary of the findings is presented in table 5.1. Specifically, as previously explained, final concepts, themes and categories were associated to the corresponding research questions that guided this qualitative study and are illustrated in the table found below.

Table 5.1: Summary of the Findings

Research Questions	Concepts, Themes, & Categories
<p>RQ1A: What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play? RQ 1B: Do they value play and if so, how and why?</p>	<p>Concept: Valuing play</p> <p>Theme: Valuing play in everyday life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positively experienced play in childhood • Positively experienced play in adulthood • Believing in play despite perceived challenges and future barriers to play
<p>RQ3: What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development in early childhood education?</p>	<p>Theme: Shifting Beliefs about the Value of Play for Learning and Development in Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing play for social development • Valuing play for cognitive development • Valuing play for learning • Playing is valuable as a cultural activity
<p>RQ2: What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitutes play?</p>	<p>Theme: Playing with a conceptualization of play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing is emotionally driven <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Playing is fun • Playing is active • Playing with what is not play
<p>RQ4: What are teacher candidate's beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children's play?</p>	<p>Theme: Believing in the value of the active role of the teacher during children's play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believing in facilitating learning through play • Believing in keeping children safe during play
<p>RQ5: What influenced teacher candidates' beliefs about Children's play? RQ5B: How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about play?</p>	<p>Concept: Constructing beliefs about the value of play through multiple and interrelated influences as a dynamic process</p> <p>Theme: Play Histories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday Experiences • Educational Experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Re-conceptualizing play through a service learning play day

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play? Do they value play and if so, how and why?

The findings revealed that teacher candidates value play in terms of their everyday life, and for its own sake as proposed by Gray (2014b) and other prominent researchers (e.g., Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005). Moreover, teacher candidates reported that they played as children and continue to play as adults. Based on their responses these play experiences have been positive. During their interviews, participants stated that they are cognizant of the need to integrate more play opportunities for themselves and their families into their daily schedules because of its value. For instance, several participants commented on the value of play in keeping people young.

Participants also narrated that after taking the environment course, they now value play as a medium for learning and development. As indicated by their demographic sheets, every participant in this study was either in their junior or senior year of college, which indicates that they were close to graduation and yet, they still believed that play was valuable to children's learning and development. This study's finding differs from the results generated by Jung and Jin's (2014) research in that their study found that although participants held positive perceptions of play in their freshman and sophomore years, quantitative data analysis showed differences beginning in their junior year of college. As stated by Jung and Jin (2014), "Specifically, senior students exhibited relatively lower positive overall perceptions of play" (p. 370). Importantly, Jung and Jin (2014) suggest that this change might be because as seniors approach graduation, they will soon be in charge of their own classes and made accountable for children's learning. However, in this present study, although teacher candidates expressed perceived fears about

implementing play in their future classrooms due to administrators' and other teachers' expectations, findings suggest that they still plan on implementing play as future teachers despite the demands of the current academic climate.

In this study, the findings unveiled that participants hold positive beliefs about play because of their previous familial and social experiences as young children and the emotions that they attached to these experiences (Nespor, 1987; Tudge, Brown, & Feitas, 2011; Roopnarine, 2011, 2014). For example, during interviews participants reported on their childhood memories of play, which included playing socially with different members of their family, with childhood friends at school and at home, and with neighbors and some adults. Participants also stated that they often had opportunities to explore and play freely without strict parental supervision (Roopnarine, 2011). Although participants stated that there was always someone around to take care of them, parents did not hover over them during their play. This finding was corroborated by participants' own verbal statements, about how their beliefs about play come from their own childhood experiences. As Roopnarine reminds us (2011):

“...family structural arrangements, and modes of production have a tremendous influence on the expression of play, the determination of play partners, the settings in which play occurs, time allocated to play and work, and the link between play and everyday cognitive and social-cultural skills. In other words, play is culturally situated in the familial and social experiences of young children, often reflecting what is valued with cultural communities”(p. 20).

In this light, the results of this study denote that participants own positive experiences of play, as children, seemed to have laid a foundation for their future beliefs about the value of play, which appeared to have continued through their adulthood (Tudge et al., 2011). Through the data

collected and analyzed, participants also reported that they continue to play despite diverse challenges as adults, such as limited time, work, and juggling multiple responsibilities. These findings again suggested that teacher candidates held positive beliefs about play prior to entering their teacher education program, being that their recollections of play appeared to have been positive. Additionally, participants' values of play were evident in their reported responses about where their beliefs about play came from, in which they stated, that these beliefs came from their childhood experiences that included their experiences with their parents. In this light, play appeared to be part of these participants' cultural scripts (Roopnarine, 2011) in that play was something that was part of their upbringing, fundamentally, of their childhood experiences. Similarly, these findings are comparable to the results of Klugman's (1996) study, which indicated that college students perceived value of play was shaped by their childhood experiences.

Correspondingly, teacher candidates also seem to value play because of the feelings or emotions that they attribute to their play experiences. As proposed by Nespor (1987) people tend to give value to experiences that were meaningful to them in their past experiences. For example, participants' comments about play being fun, and making comments about play needing to be the way they used to play as children, suggest that they attach emotions to these experiences.

Although participants did mention the use of toys and other objects in their recollections of play, what constantly emerged throughout the data was the meaning that they gave to the human interaction and the spaces in which these play opportunities took place (Tudge, et al., 2011). These findings are analogous to Kim's (1990) work on the play memories of parents of children with special needs in which participants perceived playing with people as more significant than playing with toys. Also, the findings parallel Henniger's (1994) study, in that

participants reported that their play typically took place outdoors. In sum, Hispanic teacher candidates in this study appear to value play as indicated by the findings that suggest that they value play in their everyday life and in their educational life. Participants appear to value play because of their previous experiences with familial and social-cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978) and the feelings or emotions that they ascribe to these experiences (Nespor, 1987).

Research Question 2: What are Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about what constitutes play?

Each of the ten teacher candidates who took part in this study conceptualized play by playing with their thoughts as they attempted to provide a concrete definition of play. Participants' statements indicated that they had a difficult time in providing a solid definition of play because the definitions that they offered consisted of multiple parts with varied meanings. This finding resembles the abundant literature on play that has found that play is a complicated phenomenon that is not easily defined because of its complexity (Burghardt, 2011; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Additionally, this finding is consistent with the work of Klugman (1996) whose research centered on incoming freshmen college students' perspectives of play as opposed to teacher candidates. What was also significant in Klugman's (1996) study is that participants defined play in varied ways. Defining play in multiple ways is also consistent with the recent work of Sherwood and Reifel (2010) who uncovered that the seven pre-service teachers they studied from a university in Texas, seemed to believe that "...play had multiple meanings" (p. 329). Findings suggest that participants in this study see play mainly as an active process, as what is not play and as emotionally driven.

What was different in this study from Sherwood and Reifel's (2010) research is that because teacher candidates definitions of play consisted of multiple parts, I made the decision to

ask participants what they believed was the key ingredient necessary to be considered play.

Again, the findings indicated that most of the teacher candidates in this study perceived play by the emotional value they attributed to the phenomenon of play. As such, participants responses confirmed that “having fun” was a key ingredient in play. Defining play as fun or pleasurable is a finding that corroborates with well-established definitions about play (Burghardt, 2011; Flear, 2013). Interestingly, in the literature review, some studies have also found that play is not always fun, as proposed by Greshaber and McArdle (2011).

Research Question 3: What are Hispanic teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of play in children’s learning and development in early childhood education?

Through this research I discovered that participants believe that play is valuable in children’s learning and development in diverse and interrelated ways. Hispanic teacher candidates who were interviewed for this study indicated that they believe that play is principally valuable as a medium for learning and development for children both socially and cognitively (Bergen, 1988).

A surprising finding was that prior to their teacher education program, teacher candidates perceived play as valuable in their everyday lives, but they specified that they did not think play was important for children’s learning or development. As such, this finding indicates that their beliefs about the value of play are shifting. Significantly, participants’ involvement in Dr. Dubai’s class and in the multiple opportunities that she offered to discuss play, to observe play, and to experience play, appear to have contributed to this new understanding of the educational value of play. This finding differs from Sherwood and Reifel’s (2013) recent study on preservice teachers’ beliefs about the role of play in learning, in that their participants, believed that play is valuable but that it is contradictorily not essential to children’s learning and development.

According to Sherwood and Reifel (2013), in their study they found out that, “The preservice teachers seemed to believe paradoxically that play is valuable and not essential to learning and development” (p. 272).

Another important finding in this study is that several participants revealed that play is also valuable for children with special needs. This finding was unforeseen given that this topic did not relate specifically to any of the questions that I asked and also, I did not intend to find whether participants believed in the value of play for children with special needs. Conversely, during the interviews, participants narrated their reasons for believing in the value of play for children who have disabilities such as autism, as well as children with diverse types of mental delays. Although there is a growing body of research on children with special needs and their play (e.g., Lantz et al., 2004; Rettig, 1994; Schneekloth; 1989), according to Frost et al., (2012), there are many studies that have limitations and flaws. In addition, I found no research specifically focusing on teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of play in children with special needs. In this light, this finding was important given that there is limited research on teacher candidates’ beliefs about play in general and more specifically, with regards to children with special needs.

Furthermore, the findings on teacher candidates’ beliefs about play as valuable for development agrees with Vgotksy’s belief (1967) that play is a leading activity for development because it provides avenues for new activities based on the child’s own interests and mental capabilities that include his language, and other social tools. Participants stated that children learn through play. Hispanic teacher candidates indicated that although children are having fun during play, they are simultaneously learning in diverse ways and yet, the children do not even realize this learning is taking place. Again, this finding relates to Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986)

seminal research on play being a zone of proximal development where the child feels safe and motivated to think and perform beyond his/her level of development through the support of more advanced peers or adults. As stated by, Göncü and Gaskins (2011), “It needs to be emphasized that for Vygotsky, play is a zone of proximal development because the imagined situation provides support for and guides the child’s activities” (p 50). These findings also parallel more current research, such as James and Pollar’s (2008) work with the UK’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), which found that learners make sense of their worlds through previous experiences and that learners benefit from joint and mediated activities. According to Wood (2010), “They argue for a ‘knowledge creation’ metaphor, which involves learners making sense of their world, testing new experiences against existing ways of thinking and doing things, and creating new knowledge” (p. 17).

Thus, although these findings correspond with the growing body of literature that indicates that play is valuable for children’s learning and development (Frost et al., 2012; Gray, 2014b; Brown & Vaughan, 2009), there is still uncertainty about the exactitude of how children learn and develop through play (Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Lillard et al., 2013; Pellegrini, 2011). Because of the importance of children’s learning and development, these findings, although limited to the espoused beliefs of ten participants, provide initial data on an area of play research that has remained largely unexplored as evidenced by the few studies found about this topic during this study.

Research Question 4: What are teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of the role of the teacher in children’s play?

The findings from this study revealed that participants believe in the active role of the teacher in children’s play. In this current study, findings show that participants’ beliefs about

play seem to fall within the play continuum as proposed by Wood (2010, 2013). Participants expressed that they believe in adult-led activities to some degree but that the child should have choices in their play and that they should be allowed to have free play. However, teacher candidates did indicate the teacher is an active participant in children's play for different reasons such as, the teacher being the one who sets the environment for play; models play, and if possible engages in their play (Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). For example, some participants reported that they would like to be part of their future students' play, but that they would be very careful because they would not want to interrupt their play. In particular, the participants reported that teachers need to facilitate children's play. These findings correspond with the Vygotskian (1978, 1986) view of the significant role that teachers make in mediating learning for children through scaffolding their learning. Importantly, what also surfaced during the interviews was that teacher candidates believed that the teacher plays an active role in keeping children safe during play. In this study, again, teacher candidates believed that children needed to play freely, however, they also believed that it was their job to keep the children safe.

Research Question 5: What influenced teacher candidates' beliefs about children's play?

How do these influences appear to have shaped Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about play?

Analysis of the data revealed that Hispanic teacher candidates beliefs about the value of play appeared to have been shaped by multiple and interrelated influences as a dynamic process (see figure, 4.2). A significant finding of this study is that participants' play histories influenced teacher candidates' beliefs about play (Samaras, 2002; Vygotsky, 1986). The findings suggest that participants' play histories were shaped mainly by everyday and educational experiences with play (Vygotsky, 1986). In this study, findings indicated that experiences happened within a

specific social cultural context and time (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). Particularly, for this study, the context was a border region in Texas, in the 21st century, at a time when curricular tensions about the value of play and its role in school and in everyday life, continue to abound in the United States (Almon & Miller, 2011; Golhaber, 1994; Gray, 2013). Essentially, children's time to play in school is being replaced by prescriptive viewpoints in an effort to meet accountability needs (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Ranz-Smith, 2007). As affirmed by Bodrova and Leong (2003) "The growing demands for teacher accountability and measurable outcomes for prekindergarten and kindergarten programs are pushing play to the periphery of the curriculum"(p. 50).

The findings in this study suggest that every participant felt that play was valuable outside the realm of school. However, participants' conceptualization of play were limited to their home and personal life before their experiences in their teacher education program. As previously explained, I found that participants seemed to have enhanced their understanding of the educational value of play through the fusion of their previous experiences, with the play experiences afforded through their teacher education program, specifically through the experiences from the environment course with Dr. Dubai. Fundamentally, it seems that participants used their earlier experiences as a source to understand the relevance of the value of play to children's learning and development. Consequently, the findings suggest that teacher candidates were able to re-conceptualize their understanding of play in that they now value play in terms of its everyday and educational value.

A significant finding in this study was that every participant gave credit to how their participation in the service learning play day helped them gain a deeper understanding of how play is also valuable in school as a vehicle for children's learning and development. Participants

expressed that prior to this course and in particular, to the community play day, they had not fully realized just how important or necessary play was for children's learning and development. The value of service learning has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Bollin, 2007; Hale, 2008; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009; Lake & Jones, 2008; Lawrence & Butler, 2010). However, in my review of the literature, I found only one article about a community play day at a university (Moore et al., 2012) but I did not find any empirical studies that looked at service learning and play days. Significantly, this finding supports Vygotsky's (1986) view about how formal education can impact development through authentic cultural activities (Samaras, 2002). For this study, the service learning play day provided teacher candidates with diverse opportunities to observe children in play, to engage with children in play, and to collaborate with others in play.

Compellingly, the findings for this study suggest that this shift in thinking about the value of play as something kids do, or that is done out of school, resulted after teacher candidates took the course *The Environment and Early Childhood Education* with Dr. Dubai. Each of the participants spoke about how the different activities about play in this course, were helpful in helping them understand play in new ways. However, the findings suggest that it was not until they experienced the educational value of play (through the play day), that they were able to re-conceptualize their understanding of play. Findings for this study indicated that the community play day served as a catalyst for teacher candidates' re-conceptualization of play.

Implications

This study explored the beliefs of ten Hispanic teacher candidates enrolled in a Hispanic Serving University located in a border city in the United States. The present study contributes to

the limited research on teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play. In this light, several implications for research and practice are delineated in the sections that follow.

The findings for this study suggest that teacher education programs should utilize different methods to obtain information about their students' historical background. The findings of this study indicated that participants' play histories played a significant role in their beliefs about play. Thus, integrating activities or projects that allow teacher candidates to think about their play histories is an important step in learning how to create pedagogical and curricular opportunities that meet their needs in forming the theoretical lenses needed to understand the inherent value of play as a pedagogical tool for children's learning and development (Johnson et al., 2005; Patte, 2012; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014).

In this study, the findings indicated that teacher candidates defined play in multiple ways and showed how their definitions were contextualized through their previous and current personal and educational experiences. In essence, participants appeared to be playing with a definition of play based on their newfound understanding of this phenomenon, as an educational tool and a medium for learning in the early childhood classroom. This finding indicates that teacher educators need to create pedagogical opportunities where teacher candidates can begin to organize their thoughts about how to define play. For example, such an activity could be a play web activity that gets them thinking about play, such as the activity that I provided as an icebreaker in this study. Importantly, during the interviews, this play web activity appeared to assist teacher candidates in sketching out their ideas about play prior to their interviews (see appendix G).

Additionally, findings for this research denote that teacher educators need to provide learning opportunities for teacher candidates to observe children in play. Due to the current

decline or elimination of play in the classroom and from recess time in school, teacher candidates often do not observe children in free play (Reifel, 2011, 2014). Therefore, teacher educators need to provide first-hand experiences in observing children at play in schools that promote and value play pedagogy. One way of doing this might be by collaborating with different schools and building relationships with principals and teachers who can become partners and who also provide these observational opportunities (Reifel, 2011, 2014; Johnson, 2014).

The findings from this study also suggest that those experiential opportunities had a significant influence on teacher candidates' beliefs. By engaging teacher candidates in problem-based learning within their community, teacher educators can provide their students with multiple benefits in learning in an interdisciplinary manner (Samaras, 2002). For example, in this study, the service learning play day appeared to have served as a catalyst for understanding the educational value of play. What is important to consider, is that the community play day happened through a sequence of steps that required thinking, planning, collaborating, research and mediated learning opportunities with their professor and peers, in other words, it required an interdisciplinary approach to teaching (Samara, 2002). As such, teacher educators should consider designing service-learning experiences that are situated and connected to the course objectives in a manner similar to professor Dubai's pedagogical method.

Importantly, the findings of this study also indicated that teacher preparation programs need to integrate diverse pedagogical opportunities to experience play in varied settings. Teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play, is a topic that has not been explored enough in the literature. To date, this study is one of the few found in the literature. In sum, this study provides teacher educators and researchers with preliminary insights into key issues that

might help shape future research that concerns preparing teacher candidates about the pedagogical value of children's play in learning and development.

Limitations

This study examined the beliefs of Hispanic teacher candidates enrolled in a Hispanic serving university located in the border region of south Texas in the United States. The sample was limited to ten participants who were enrolled in three different sections of a course in a teacher education program at the bachelor level titled, ECED 4389, *Environments in Early Childhood Education* during the spring and summer semesters of 2014. Due to the preceding, the study is limited to profiling the beliefs of a group of ten Hispanic teacher candidates regarding their perceived experiences about the value of play. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Rather, the findings reflect a specific group's perspective within a specific context rather than representing the general perspectives of all Hispanic teacher candidates. Another limitation is that the beliefs that were represented in this study were those that participants were willing to communicate. The fact that the teacher candidates who participated in this research were all enrolled in three distinct sections of a course taught by the same professor is also a limitation. Even though qualitative studies tend to focus on small samples, in this study, the sample of only ten participants is a limitation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This study could have benefited from a larger sample and from spending more time in the field collecting additional data. A further limitation to this study was that I was a doctoral student using constructivist grounded theory methods in a formal study for the first time. Constructivist grounded theory is an interpretive process that is dependent on the researcher's experiences and prior knowledge. As such, this is a limitation for this study. Finally, the last limitation for this

study was that due in part to participants' availability and time conflicts, full transcriptions of interviews and its corresponding open coding procedure, was not always completed prior to subsequent interviews. While there are clearly limitations to this research study, this research provides a new and significant lens into exploring Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings for this study indicate that there are various directions for additional research in the area of teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development given that this study is one of only three that has been conducted since 2010. In this light, this study is a stepping-stone into exploring teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play with the purpose of improving the preparation that teacher candidates receive in their teacher preparation programs about play as pedagogy and its value in early childhood classrooms (Johnson et al., 2005).

Prior to this study there was no other empirical research found that investigated Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of children's play in relation to learning and development. The participants for this study were Hispanic therefore; the beliefs shared were expressed from this lens. Clearly, it is important to highlight that Hispanic is an umbrella term and as such, being of Mexican descent is just one of many communities that identify as Hispanic. Evidently, the Hispanic community is incredibly diverse (Nieto et al., 2013) and therefore, other ethnic groups' beliefs, which fall under the umbrella term of Hispanic and or Latino/a, need to be explored in order to fill this gap in the literature.

This study was conducted in in South City, which shares a border with Mexico. The population studied was Hispanic, specifically of Mexican descent. As such several of the

participants shared their experiences about straddling between Mexico and the United States and shared the multiplicity of experiences about play and other realities that emerged as a result of living in different social contexts (The United States and Mexico). Certainly, given the multiplicities of experiences that exist within the Hispanic community (Nieto et al., 2013), future investigation is needed about other Hispanic communities, by other teacher educators in other contexts. Given that Hispanics represent the largest Non-White group of college students in the United States, it would be valuable to study other Hispanic communities, in a different border city to find if the results are consistent or similar to the findings that emerged from this present qualitative study (Fry, 2011; Nunez et al., 2015).

Data for this study was collected and analyzed in line with qualitative methodology with constructivist grounded theory methods. As such, the findings that emerged are qualitative in nature (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009). The data that was collected came from participants enrolled in a Hispanic Serving university. With this said, further research can be conducted with a larger sample utilizing quantitative methods. An instrument could be designed using likert scale measurements to collect large amounts of data from different Hispanic Serving universities in Texas and even collected from other states.

Another recommendation for future research would be to collect data specifically from male Hispanic teacher candidates. In this study, there was only one male participant. Although the data that emerged from his participation in this study yielded important findings, more data is clearly needed to form a better understanding of males who are seeking a degree in early childhood education, especially given the lack of male teachers that practice in the field of early childhood.

Although this study did not specifically set out to recruit participants who were seeking a degree in special education, several were in fact seeking degrees in both early childhood and special education. A different study could conduct research specifically with teacher candidates who are pursuing degrees in special education to understand their beliefs about the value of children's play, explicitly, for children with diverse special needs.

A longitudinal study that collects data from teacher candidates during their teacher education programs and then follows them into their in-service practice would be beneficial to the early childhood community. It would be valuable to learn whether teacher candidate's beliefs align with their practice given the challenges posed by the current data driven climate of accountability (Almon & Miller, 2011). For example, a question worth exploring could be: Do Teacher candidates beliefs about the value of play change with time, experiences, and/or settings and if so, in what ways?

Although no participant explicitly mentioned the value of the service or civic component, in their play day experience when responding to the interview questions, each of the participants perceived the play day as valuable to their understanding of play. Given the relevance of the service learning community play day in this present study, further research could explore the relationship between engaging in service learning as an educational experience and the teacher candidate's attitude, knowledge and dispositions regarding play as a medium for learning and development in the early childhood classroom (Seban, 2013; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Data revealed that not one participant verbally organized their definitions of play or any response for that manner, by explicating or grounding it in any explicit theoretical underpinnings. Perhaps this could have been because I did not ask specific questions about their theories of play. With this said, a study that looks at teacher candidates' theories about play

could be useful to understand to what degree, does a conceptual lens have in aiding teacher candidates in conceptualizing play. As Johnson et al., (2005) reminds us, “Theories about play are important because they are conceptual lenses through which we view play and that directly affect how we respond to children’s play behavior” (Beyer & Bloch, 1996, as cited in Johnson et al., 2005, p. 32). In sum, drawing from my findings, these are some recommendations for future research that could potentially add to the literature about teacher candidates, teacher education and play.

Conclusions

Although the topic of play has been widely studied, one area that remains largely unexplored, is teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of children’s play and how these beliefs are possibly shaped. Understanding teacher candidates’ beliefs about the value of play is a significant step in understanding how to better prepare future teachers with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to teach diverse learners in early childhood settings in a manner that is consistent with developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). As Johnson et al., (2005) reminds us, “ Beliefs about play are formed in context and have a critical bearing on practices and policies that affect children and their play” (p. 1). In this light, teacher candidates’ beliefs toward play must be explored early in their teacher education program with diverse types of pedagogical and curricular opportunities. Due to the limited research on teacher candidates’ beliefs about play, this study could be beneficial for learning about how certain pedagogical approaches possibly shaped teacher candidates’ educational beliefs about play. Although the findings indicate that participants’ everyday experiences served as a foundation for the future value they ascribed to play pedagogy and its usefulness to children’s learning and development, the findings revealed that teacher candidate’s re-conceptualization of play shifted

after their experiences in a teacher education course that integrated multiple opportunities to learn about play and in particular, after their experience in the community play day.

While the sample of this study is small, qualitatively, it represents voices that have not been represented in the literature. Essentially, this study's findings represent the voices from ten Hispanic teacher candidates who attended a Hispanic Serving University in South Texas, and as such, these voices should be seen as relevant, because they will soon become practicing teachers and their philosophical framework on play is important for the practices they will choose to use in their future classrooms (Johnson, 2014; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). Moreover, given the steady growth of the Hispanic/Latino/a population and of other groups in the United States, this study could be beneficial for other teacher educators working with diverse groups of teacher candidates (U.S. Census, 2010; Nieto et al., 2013). Although this study would have benefitted from a larger sample, and more time in the field, its findings can serve as a stepping stone for further research on teacher education, and in particular, on the value of children's play to learning and development.

As I have discussed at length, because very little is known about teacher candidates' beliefs about play, there is limited research on how to prepare teacher candidates about the value of play as pedagogy (Hyson, 2006; Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). As such, it is my hope that this study will contribute to the future conversation about play in terms of practice and research in teacher education, particularly, regarding teacher candidates and their beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Invitation Letter

July 7, 2014

IRB Protocol Number: 2014-036-IRB

Dear Teacher Candidate,

I am a doctoral candidate in Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Early Childhood at the University of Texas in Brownsville. For my dissertation research, I am investigating Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in children's learning and development and how these beliefs were shaped. Also, I am examining teacher candidates' beliefs about the teacher's role in children's play.

Recently, I received approval from the Ethics Review Board to conduct my study and I would like to invite you to participate. If you are interested, your participation will include: (a) completing and initial demographic & basic information sheet, (b) completing a play web activity, (c) two interviews, (d) observations, (e) analysis of your class assignments.

With your permission, interviews will be scheduled at your convenience in a comfortable public setting such as the university. Moreover, I plan to audio tape each interview in order to ensure accuracy and to minimize misunderstandings or misperceptions. Furthermore, notes will also be taken during the interview.

Given that you recently took a course that includes play as part of the curriculum, I would like to invite you to take part in this research.

If you would like to participate, I will present you with an Informed Consent form for you to review before granting your permission.

In gratitude for your participation, you will receive a certificate and letter of appreciation.

I would like to thank you for your time and consideration. If the project is of interest to you, it would be my pleasure to meet with you and answer any questions that you may have about this study.

You may contact me at [REDACTED]

Thank you for your consideration,
Diana H. Cortez-Castro, Doctoral Candidate, University of Texas at Brownsville

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

Consent Form for Teacher Candidate

Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the role of play in children's learning and development

You are invited to participate in a research study supervised by Dr. Georgianna Duarte from the University of Texas at Brownsville and investigated by Doctoral Candidate, Diana H. Cortez-Castro.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about the value of play in relation to children's learning and development in school settings. Also to investigate teacher candidates' beliefs about the teacher's role in children's play. Finally, to discover what personal and academic experiences shaped those beliefs. Through this research, I will be able to understand better the how Hispanic teacher candidates perceive play and its value in early childhood education.

You have been selected because you are enrolled in a section of a course (ECED 4389.02, Environments in ECE) that integrates playful experiences like participating in service learning community play day as part of the objectives of the course.

If you are interested your participation will involve:

1. Completing and initial demographic sheet and completing a play web activity.
2. Attend two in-depth interviews about your beliefs about play that will be captured on audio-tape.
 - a. Initial interview (approximately 60-90 minutes).
 - b. Second interview (approximately 30-60 minutes).
3. Two full day observations periods (approximately three hours each). The days will be decided in agreement with the professor's schedule.
4. One service learning play day observation at the zoo.
5. Analysis of your class assignment such as: online discussions about play/play day, photo, and final reflective paper.

The interviews will be scheduled at a time and place of convenience to both you and the researchers. A possible location can be the university campus.

Your participation will be anonymous, in that your real name will not be used and there are no known risks associated with this research.

Although there is not direct benefit to you, your participation will contribute to our overall understanding of teacher candidates' beliefs about play and may help educational institutions like UTB to better prepare teacher candidates about how to effectively address play in teacher preparation programs in the future.

Additionally, taking part in this study will give you an opportunity to reflect on your own lived experiences and hopefully share this knowledge with others.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any given time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

Participants will be thanked with a certificate and letter of appreciation after their participation in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact Diana H. Cortez-Castro at [REDACTED] or Diana.cortezcastro1@utb.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, you may contact the UTB Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at (956) 882-7731.

Consent

By agreeing to participate in this study, I _____ understand that my involvement will consist of sharing personal information about my beliefs about play in relation to learning and development; my beliefs about what role I will take in children's play as a future teacher; and my personal and academic experiences that possibly shaped these beliefs. I also understand that the results of this study may be presented at conferences and /or published in academic journals but the name of the participants and of the university will remain anonymous.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

I give my consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature _____ Date: _____
Researcher Signature _____ Date: _____

Please note:
A copy of this consent form should be given to you.

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

Demographic Sheet

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Language Spoken:
5. Race/Ethnicity:
6. Program of Study:
7. Year in program of study:
8. Course

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Can you tell me about yourself, either personally or academically or both?
2. Tell me about a time that you recently played.
3. Can you tell me what do you remember about your childhood play?
4. Can you share with me what types of play did you engage in as a child?
5. Where did you play as a child?
6. Who did you play with as a child?
7. I am interested in your personal beliefs about play. How would you define or describe play?
8. What is the key ingredient needed in order to be considered play?
9. When you think about play what types of activities or behaviors come to your mind?

10. Do you believe children learn through play? If so, what do children learn through play?

11. Do you believe that play contributes to children's development? If so, in what ways?

12. Do you believe that play should be part of the early childhood classroom?

13. What do you think is the teacher's role in play?

14. As a future teacher will you have a role in children's play and if so, in what ways?

15. As a future teacher how will you integrate play into the classroom?

16. Have you learned about play in your teacher education program and if so, in what ways?

17. Can you tell me what type of activities, assignments or projects you have engaged in as part of your teacher education program?

18. Have these activities, assignments or projects impacted your beliefs about play and if so, in what ways?

19. Which academic experience if any, do you believe has mostly influenced your beliefs about play?

20. Where do you think your ideas about play came from?

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX E

ORIGINAL UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL



Research Integrity and Compliance
The University of Texas at Brownsville

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.
IRB Chair

April 16, 2014

Ms. Diana Cortez-Castro
The University of Texas at Brownsville
One West University Blvd.
Brownsville, Texas 78520
RE: IRB-HS Approval

Study Title: "Hispanic Teacher Candidates' Beliefs about the Role of Play in Children's Learning and Development"

Protocol #: 2014-036-IRB

Dear Ms. Cortez-Castro,

In accordance with Federal Regulations for review of research protocols, the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects of The University of Texas at Brownsville has reviewed your study as requested.

The IRB-HS grants its approval for this project contingent on compliance with the following items. You may make as many copies of the stamped consent form as are necessary for your activity. All consent forms MUST bear the UTB IRB stamp indicating approval.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator also include:

- Inform the IRB-HS in writing immediately of any emergent problems or proposed changes.
- Do not proceed with the research until any problems have been resolved and the IRB-HS have reviewed and approved any changes.
- Report any significant findings that become known in the course of the research that might affect the willingness of the subjects to take part.
- Protect the confidentiality of all personally identifiable information collected.
- Submit for review and approval by the IRB-HS all modifications to the protocol or consent form(s) prior to implementation of any change(s).
- Submit an activity/progress report regarding research activities to the IRB-HS on no less than an annual basis or as directed by the IRB-HS through the Continuing Review Form.
- Notify the IRB-HS when study has been completed through submission of a Project Completion Report.

Should you have any questions or need any further information concerning this document please feel free to contact me at (956) 882-8888 or via email at Matthew.Johnson@utb.edu.

Sincerely yours,

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.
IRB – Chair

Approval Type:

- Full Board Review
- Designated Member Review
- Continuing Review
- Change request/Modification/Amendment
- Exempt Category 2
- Expedited Category

Approval Period:

Start Date: April 16, 2014

End Date: April 15, 2015

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX F

MODIFIED UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL



Research Integrity and Compliance
The University of Texas at Brownsville

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.
IRB Chair

April 29, 2015

Dr. Diana Cortez-Castro
The University of Texas at Brownsville
One West University Blvd.
Brownsville, Texas 78520
RE: IRB-HS Approval

Study Title: "Exploring Hispanic Teacher Candidates' Beliefs
about the Value of Play in Children's Learning
and Development"

Protocol #: 2014-036-IRB

Dear Dr. Cortez-Castro,

In accordance with Federal Regulations for review of research protocols the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects of The University of Texas at Brownsville has reviewed your study as requested.

The IRB-HS grants its approval for this project contingent on compliance with the following items. You may make as many copies of the stamped consent form as are necessary for your activity. All consent forms MUST bear the UTB IRB stamp indicating approval.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator also include:

- Inform the IRB-HS in writing immediately of any emergent problems or proposed changes.
- Do not proceed with the research until any problems have been resolved and the IRB-HS have reviewed and approved any changes.
- Report any significant findings that become known in the course of the research that might affect the willingness of the subjects to take part.
- Protect the confidentiality of all personally identifiable information collected.
- Submit for review and approval by the IRB-HS all modifications to the protocol or consent form(s) prior to implementation of any change(s).
- Submit an activity/progress report regarding research activities to the IRB-HS on no less than an annual basis or as directed by the IRB-HS through the Continuing Review Form.
- Notify the IRB-HS when study has been completed through submission of a Project Completion Report.

Should you have any questions or need any further information concerning this document please feel free to contact me at (956) 882-8888 or via email at Matthew.Johnson@utb.edu.

Sincerely yours,

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.

Matthew Johnson, Ph.D.
IRB – Chair

Approval Type:

- Full Board Review
- Designated Member Review
- Continuing Review
- Change request/Modification/Amendment
- Exempt Category
- Expedited Category

Approval Period:

Start Date: April 29, 2015

End Date: April 28, 2016

One West University Blvd. • BRHP 2.210 • Brownsville, Texas 78520 • 956-882-7731 • research.compliance@utb.edu

APPENDIX G

APPENDIX G

PLAY WEB SAMPLE



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diana H. Cortez-Castro was born in Brownsville, Texas, on February 23, 1977. She is the daughter of Oliverio and Adelina. She has been married to her husband Lupe for nineteen years and together they are raising their four children, Isaac, Emily, Michael and Matthew. In 2004, Diana earned her Bachelor degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Texas in Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. That same year, she entered graduate school at the same university and in December of 2006, Diana received a Master of Education in Early Childhood. In 2015, Mrs. Cortez-Castro earned her Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Early Childhood from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Since 2007, she has worked in higher education for UTB/TSC, UTB, TSC and now for UTRGV preparing teacher candidates in the Rio Grande Valley with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to work with diverse learners and to become successful future teachers. Diana has presented her research in local, state and national conferences such as AERA and NAEYC. Diana is the co-editor of *Children's play: Research, reflections and possibilities*. This book is a special project of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA). Mrs. Cortez-Castro's primary research interests are children's play, Hispanic teacher candidates' beliefs about play, service learning, community play days, self-study and curriculum & instruction.

Permanent address: 2452 Deer Trail, Brownsville, Texas 78521