WORK HARD, PLAY HARD: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY IN TIMES OF
RIGOR AND HIGH ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

As school districts navigated data and how to evidence student growth and success, educational stakeholders felt the pressure of increased testing requirements. The additional pressure led to more teacher-directed lecturing and paperwork for students rather than more open-ended, project-oriented lessons and active activities (Elkind, 2007), consequently, increased accountability and rigor causes educational stakeholders to lose sight of the value of early childhood programs (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007), and the value of play.

This concurrent triangulation mixed methods study (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010) explored adult stakeholder perceptions concerning the role of play as an educational tool in times of high rigor and accountability utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005). In the study, surveys were used to measure the connection between adult perceptions of play and school readiness. At the same time, adult perceptions regarding the role of play in a child’s education were explored using qualitative interviews with adult stakeholders (e.g., administrators and teachers) throughout the state of Missouri. Collected data for this study was examined using inductive analysis as common themes emerged. All participants in this study alluded to the fact that play is learning in one form or another. Response trends also included the importance of developing social-emotional skills as well as working with the “whole child” rather than solely focusing on academics. To this end, we as a society are missing prime opportunities to better develop well-rounded children who not only comprehend academic concepts, but who also have healthy self-concepts as well as to understand and exhibit socially acceptable behaviors.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

The following are two very different scenarios: one five-year-old child is on the school readiness track completing work in workbooks and practicing proper letter formation as a part of his/her evening ritual. Meanwhile, another five-year-old child is playing with his/her parents on the floor, conversing about the multi-colored cars they are driving and counting who has the most cars in their pile. Which child is learning more? Finding an appropriate answer may be as much about the structure of the school day as it is about the contextualizing of the lessons for the child (Bailey, 2001; Chaille, 2008).

Prompted by a stronger focus on rigor and accountability, the challenge for today’s early childhood education includes the perceived role of play (Elkind, 2007). Educational stakeholders are forced to review the role of play in the school setting, leaving some to wonder, has “play” become an objectionable four-letter word? Conversely, Conyers and Wilson (2015) noted, “Learning is not just a cognitive function. Thinking, feeling, and physicality all come together to develop new knowledge and skills” (p. 38).

Changes in legislation and expectations regarding school readiness have greatly impacted what play looks like and how it is perceived. Early childhood education interventions have gained momentum and growing research supports their impact on a child’s overall educational success (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). School readiness for every child is the ultimate goal of these early intervention programs, though there are varying definitions and interpretations of what school readiness actually means (Brown, 2010). Despite high expectations and stringent standards, policies, and regulations,
funding for early childhood programming is simply not there (Brown, 2010). Providing all of the necessary services to assist these young children in reaching their educational potential becomes extremely challenging when the money to do so is minimal.

At the state level, early childhood funding continues to decrease annually, yet there seems to be an underlying nation-wide expectation that early childhood education programs be incorporated into school districts (Espinosa, 2002). Though these programs are essential, there are school districts that avoid taking on state-funded early childhood programs due to excessive costs of operation (Elkind, 2007). Similar struggles exist at the local level in that there is a public demand for early education experiences for children yet, all too often, local entities and school districts do not have the finances to support such programs (Brown, 2010). If funding is scarce at the federal, state, and local levels, what types of early childhood experiences are our young children actually receiving?

Funding, although a prevalent issue in education, is not the only issue in early childhood education at this time. Presidential endorsement of early childhood combined with policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (EOP, 2015) as well as educational initiatives like Common Core State Standards [CCSS] (NGA, 2009) and Missouri Learning Standards [MLS] (DESE, 2016) have significantly influenced current practices. Educational reform, though seemingly developed with the best intentions, creates unfavorable educational conditions across the nation due to inconsistent implementation procedures (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007; Superfine, 2005). In addition, society—including educational stakeholders—rarely comprehends what learning looks like at this early stage.
of child development. Consequently, developmentally appropriate practices are not always reflected in the early childhood setting (Bailey, 2001; Bennett, 2003).

Along with a lack of understanding regarding what is developmentally appropriate for young children in the educational setting, there is much obscurity that accompanies the Common Core State Standards [CCSS] (Brown, 2010; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). CCSS and MLS were developed to lend clarity and consistency to learning expectations for students (NGA, 2010; DESE, 2016), however it actually resulted in more confusion and ambiguity. As school districts navigated data and how to evidence student growth and success, educational stakeholders felt the pressure of increased testing requirements. The additional pressure led to more teacher-directed lecturing and paperwork for students rather than more open-ended, project-oriented lessons and active activities (Elkind, 2007), consequently, increased accountability and rigor causes educational stakeholders to lose sight of the value of early childhood programs (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007).

**Constructivist Learning Theory as Conceptual Framework**

The focus of this investigation was the perceived role of play in times of rigor and high accountability and how the use of play impacts school readiness. Much like learning, learning theory takes on many forms—there is no all-encompassing learning theory that accounts for all learner needs. For the purpose of this study, several learning theories were explored and, using Heppner and Heppner’s (2004) analysis process, the researcher funneled down from situated learning theory, social learning theory, structural learning theory, and experiential learning theory before deciding upon constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) as the appropriate approach for providing answers to the
overarching research questions.

Though there is much research evidencing the general benefits of play, there is considerably less research available linking constructivism (Piaget, 1929) and the potential benefits of play in becoming school ready (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). There is also plenty of research stressing the different learner types and how to address individual learner needs (Bailey, 2001, 2011) through the understanding of learning theory. For the purpose of this study, constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) served as the conceptual framework. Constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) is a combination of a variety of learning theories. Like Lave and Wagner’s (1990) situated learning theory, constructivist learning theory takes into consideration the activity, context, and culture of the classroom setting. Like Vygotsky (1962) stressed, social interactions and open conversations are also a large part of the constructivist learning theory as student to student, teacher to student, and teacher to parent conversations are encouraged (Piaget, 1929).

Bandura’s (1977, 1997) social learning theory also extended upon Vygotsky (1962), but honed in on human behavior. Bandura’s version of social learning theory emphasized the importance of observing and modeling behaviors, including attitudes and emotional reactions. Underlying key components of this theory include attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Again, each of these components was found in the constructivist learning theory, as intrinsic motivation is built through observing students and providing positive, detailed feedback. Constructivism also encourages teachers as facilitators, allowing students the control to solve problems and make choices (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura,
While problem-solving is a key soft skill in becoming a lifelong learner (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), this study required a learning theory where problem-solving is one aspect of learning and not the entire focus.

Finally, Kolb’s (1984, 2005) experiential learning theory shares many commonalities with the constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) since both theories suggest that learning is equivalent to personal change and growth, with the instructor acting as a facilitator. Experience makes learning meaningful (Bruner, 1996; Kolb, 1984, 2005; Piaget, 1929). Both experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984, 2005) and constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) include creating a positive environment conducive to balancing intellectual and emotional growth as well as sharing thoughts and feelings with learners without overpowering conversations. Both theories require complete student participation in the learning process with student control over the nature and direction of lessons and activities. In reviewing various literature, it became evident that experiential learning theory incorporates many elements of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory.

Overall, each of the above learning theories shares elements of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist theory, which strongly stresses active learning, constructing new ideas and/or concepts based on either prior or current knowledge, or some combination of the two. This theory is very much about building upon pre-existing schemas through intentional planning and the providing of materials and experiences which allow for exploration and manipulation (DESE, 2013; Piaget, 1929). When implementing this type of learning, the instructor should encourage students to discover principles for themselves, promoting active discussion and hands-on opportunities.
Also through this theory, children are given the opportunity to share control and to take ownership in their learning. The students lead activities, and the instructor acts as a facilitator in order to extend learning through asking meaningful, higher-order questions and promoting development of critical thinking skills (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Piaget, 1929). Enhancing problem-solving skills is another aspect of the constructivist learning theory, as children are encouraged to try on their own, allowing for trial and error as a means of eventually achieving success (Bruner, 1996; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Scandura & Scandura, 1980).

After reviewing various literature and assessing the appropriate approach for this investigation, the researcher chose constructivist learning theory. Because the focus of this study relates to adult stakeholder perceptions of play and school readiness, constructivist learning theory served this purpose well. Play is constructivist as children explore their environments and expand upon preconceived ideas (Elkind, 2007). In doing so, children are able to make sense of the world around them, meanwhile preparing themselves for their paths to learning and becoming school ready (DESE, 2013; Epstein, 2009, 2014). Constructivist learning theory also captured elements of several other learning theories, such as situated learning theory (Lave, 1990), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997), structural learning theory (Scandura & Scandura, 1980), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984, 2005). Therefore, the umbrella of constructivist theory expands to cover all aspects of this study.

**Statement of the Problem**

Developmentally appropriate activities seem to have become a practice of the past in education since the creation of *No Child Left Behind* [NCLB] (NCLB, 2001) and the
Every Student Succeeds Act (EOP, 2015) as well as Common Core State Standards [CCSS] (NGA, 2010) and Missouri Learning Standards (DESE, 2016. The resulting increase in rigor and accountability measures stemming from the new legislation and standards brought with it added stress and pressures for educational stakeholders (Elkind, 2007; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). As stringent performance expectations filtered down from high school to early childhood, play has become less of an educational tool and more of a luxury to be utilized only after core competencies are addressed first (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Elkind, 2007).

As educational stakeholders try to address the added stress and pressures that accompany increased rigor and accountability measures, play has lost rank as a priority within early childhood settings (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Elkind, 2007). Educators should remember play serves multiple functions in a child’s life, such as the following: 1) it provides natural learning and problem-solving opportunities (Bruner, 1996; Diamond & Lee, 2011; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980); 2) it acts as an outlet for children to express fears, concerns, questions, and ideas (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962); and 3) it provides glimpses into a child’s home life and prior experiences (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). All of these inquiries advocate that play has importance for the development of children who will be prepared to solve thought-provoking problems (Weisberg, Kittredge, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Klahr, 2015).

Furthermore, there is much research available to speak to the value of play (Chaille, 2008; Curtis & Carter, 2003; Epstein, 2009, 2014), but there is noticeably less available research supporting the use of play as an educational tool as a means of
increasing school readiness. Studies also exist (Epstein, 2009, 2014; Helm & Katz, 2011) linking learning processes in children and young adults, including aspects of constructivist learning as mentioned above. Most of these studies agreed that active engagement, an essential component of long-term learning, occurred when learning was interest-based, interactive, and exploratory (Bailey, 2001; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2007). Active engagement allows learners to practice and extend upon current abilities in order to shift from emerging skills to becoming proficient or even advanced in those skills (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, and McLean, 2001; Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009; Lisco & O’Dell, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, & Denckla, 1996). While generalizations emerge from research relative to older children and/or young adults and might be applied to younger children, there was still an informational gap in existence that this study aimed to explore. Thus, because overarching research questions guiding this study related to the overall educational impacts play has on a child’s life, this was not only a societal issue but also a problem of practice.

**Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this concurrent mixed methods study was to explore adult perspectives (e.g., administrators and teachers), utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), concerning the role of play in a child’s early education. In the study, surveys were used to measure the connection between adult perceptions of play and school readiness. At the same time, adult perceptions regarding the role of play in a child’s education were explored using qualitative interviews with adult stakeholders (e.g., administrators and teachers)
throughout the state of Missouri. The reason for combining both quantitative and qualitative data was to better understand this research problem by converging both quantitative (broad numeric trends) and qualitative (detailed views) data and to advocate for young children and their right to learn in a developmentally appropriate manner (Creswell, 2009).

**Significance of the Study**

This study aimed to provide a mirror for adult stakeholders so that they may deeply reflect upon the role of play as an educational tool even in times of high rigor and accountability. If inconsistencies in adult beliefs and adult practices existed concerning the value of play, this research requires that such inconsistencies be acknowledged. The use of play and other developmentally appropriate strategies in schools positively influence our educational system and the learning processes of children (Bailey, 2001; Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929) as recognized in the research. Thus, understanding how high stakes accountability is impacting the use of such an educational tool is important. Furthermore, children who are taught utilizing developmentally *inappropriate* methods are far less likely to achieve school readiness and overall educational success (Rivera, 2009; Scandura & Scandura, 1980; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962), while in contrast, if we utilize methods that are developmentally appropriate, we nurture the whole child by allowing him/her to self-teach (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962); solve problems (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980); express themselves in a healthy manner (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962); and provide insight into his/her home life and prior experiences (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005).
Research Questions

Research questions guiding this study included:

1. What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?

2. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?

3. How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?

4. How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?

Design of the Study

This study utilized a concurrent triangulation mixed methods approach in that quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Literature on qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994) and surveys (Fink, 2009; Mertens, 2005) as well as delving into literature regarding play and its role in education today, assisted in the development of letters of informed consent for participants as well as the survey and interview protocol. As Seidman (2006) asserted, “In order to willingly consent in the truest sense, potential participants must know enough about the research to be able to gauge in a meaningful way whether they want to proceed” (p. 61). A quasi-experimental
design was executed, so participants were selected according to a purposeful representational sample dividing the state of Missouri into four quadrants (Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest) rather than a random sampling (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010). More specifically, study participants were identified according to their current status as early childhood personnel (e.g., administrators or teachers) within the state of Missouri.

Collected data were analyzed through an inductive analysis process in which data were coded for themes and commonalities (Hatch, 2002). Triangulation of data occurred in the use of multiple collection methods in order to address credibility and transferability (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010). Reliability and validity were addressed within the study by “…establishing indicators provid[ing] evidence that the information generated in the research [wa]s trustworthy and believable” (Mertens, 2005, p. 346). Also in this study, assumptions and personal biases were not imparted upon participants, and a strict ethical code was followed.

**Limitations and Assumptions of the Study**

This study invited a host of educational stakeholders in the state of Missouri to participate, though not every stakeholder was able to do so. It is also necessary to note that, because Missouri was the only state involved, the responses may have been narrower than if the study were expanded to cover a larger area. In addition, the resulting data would have been richer with improved implications had a larger area been studied. The research design also lent itself to limitations in that a mixed methods design required extensive data collection, and analysis of such data quantities required a substantial time commitment. At times, it proved difficult both comparing the two different forms of data
collected and in deciphering results. Also related to examining these two forms of data, there rose occasional discrepancies among the qualitative versus the quantitative information gathered (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010).

Assumptions guiding the focus of this study related primarily to the educational and career background of the researcher. The majority of the researcher’s background related to early childhood and developmentally appropriate practices and curricula. Because of this, there was a tendency to be very protective of young children and their rights to enjoy childhood. Personal bias (Creswell, 2009) existed in the researcher’s belief that our society often misinterprets what learning should look like for young children. With this said, through triangulation of data as well as inductive analysis, the researcher avoided imparting any form of assumptions or personal biases upon data interpretations and findings.

Positionality of the researcher throughout this study was approached through a constructivist paradigm (Hatch, 2002). Again, because the researcher held preconceived beliefs regarding the role of play in education today as well as holding a strong constructivist viewpoint, data were analyzed using the method of induction. This ensured that findings resulted only from that of data collected from participants rather than the viewpoint of the researcher.

**Definition of Key Terms**

This study utilized a variety of terms and definitions, ranging from broad meanings to definitions explicit to this study’s purpose and research questions. The inclusion of key terms and definitions was meant to assist in attaining deeper
comprehension regarding the perceived value of play as an educational tool (Bruffee, 1999). For the purpose of this study, key terms were identified and defined as follows:

**Accountability.** This term references the need for educational stakeholders to be held responsible for student learning and growth, noting that they are wrapped in administrative support and are aware that there will be consistent follow-up and expectations of making data-driven decisions (Brown, 2010; Pink, 2005).

**Common Core State Standards [CCSS].** This term denotes a set of clear college- and career-ready standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. These standards were developed by State education chiefs and governors in 48 states. Today, it is mandated that all states adopt the standards, which are designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to take credit bearing introductory courses in two- or four-year college programs or enter the workforce (Common Core State Standards Initiative, Adopted 2010).

**Constructivism.** This term is defined by Chaille (2008) as “a theory of learning that posits that children construct knowledge through interaction between their own ideas and experiences in the social and physical world” (p. 5). In essence, humans build their knowledge through experience by constructing their own meanings (Piaget, 1929).

**Early Childhood Education.** This term is used to describe the field of care and education for young children from birth to age eight (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

**Educational Rigor.** This term refers to challenging minds with more than lecture and teaching to the test. Rigor is about analytic reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving, and animated discussion in learning (Pink, 2005).

**Educational tool.** This term denotes anything used to accomplish an educational
Learning Theory. This term references how information is absorbed, processed, and retained. Cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences, as well as prior experience, all play a part in how understanding is acquired or changed and knowledge and skills retained.

Missouri Learning Standards. These grade-level and course-level expectations developed by the state of Missouri align with the Show-Me-Standards and define the knowledge and skills students need in each grade level and course for success in college, other post-secondary training and careers (DESE, 2016).

Play. This term refers to an activity in which self-teaching occurs in one form or another. More specifically, a child plays through situations very much like an adult thinks through a situation (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962).

School Readiness. This term asserts that, as kindergartners, it is the expectation that children arrive equipped with appropriate coping skills, able to negotiate and navigate obstacles and challenges that delay or defer their preferred goals as well as to self-regulate behaviors and emotions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, pp. 120-138). Being prepared academically is also of value.

Stakeholder. This term is comprised of any adults currently involved in a child’s education, including administrators such as principals as well as teachers.

Summary

This concurrent triangulation mixed methods study (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010) explored adult stakeholder perceptions concerning the role of play as an educational tool in times of high rigor and accountability. The additional pressures and
stress of proving the academic worth of a student, school, or district resulted in large part from NCLB (NCLB, 2001) and ESSA (EOP, 2015) as well as CCSS (NGA, 2010) and MLS (DESE, 2016). Collected data for this study was examined using inductive analysis as common themes emerged. Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored readers to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play. This study also advocated for the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education, meanwhile serving as a reminder that the skills required for school readiness and overall educational success was not so different from the soft skills required by high school students as they transitioned into college and/or careers.

While generalizations surfacing from studies involving high school and/or higher education may be applied to younger children, there was no guarantee that these generalizations would be accurate. There was still an informational gap in existence that this study aimed to explore. Similarly, while there is much research available to speak to the benefits of play (Bailey, 2000, 2001, 2011; Chaille, 2008; Elkind, 2007), there is significantly less available to speak to the use of play as an educational tool as a means of increasing school readiness. Presented in Chapter Two is a review of the literature related to the study. Delineated in Chapter Three are the research design, data analysis, and description of the population and sample. Included in Chapter Four are the results of the study, and finally in Chapter Five, a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research are articulated.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

More and more children are denied opportunities for developmentally appropriate activities, such as play, as early childhood teachers and administrators struggle to keep up with increased rigor and accountability measures (Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Brown, 2010; Madsen, Schroeder, & Irby, 2014; Pink, 2005). With the additional challenges and pressures that accompany increased rigor and accountability measures (Madsen, Schroeder, & Irby, 2014; Pink, 2005), play has taken a backseat as an educational tool (Bailey, 2011; Gagnon, Reichard, Kidder-Ashley, Griggs, Struby, & Bollinger, 2014). According to Elkind (2007), even “parents, anxious for their children to succeed in an increasingly competitive global economy, regard play as a luxury that the contemporary child cannot afford” (p. ix). This is viewed by many researchers (Gagnon, et al., 2014; Helm & Katz, 2011; Piaget, 1929) as a serious omission in the development of a child since play can serve multiple functions in a child’s life, including but not limited to the following: 1) it provides natural learning and problem-solving opportunities (Gagnon, et al., 2014; Helm & Katz, 2011; Piaget, 1929); 2) it acts as an outlet for children to express fears, concerns, questions, and ideas (Bailey, 2001; Epstein, 2009, 2014; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005); and 3) it provides glimpses into a child’s home life and prior experiences (Epstein, 2009, 2014; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005).

While there is much research available to speak to the benefits of play (Chaille, 2008; Weisberg, et al., 2015), and there is research available concerning the importance of developing soft skills (i.e., problem-solving, social etiquette and expectations, building

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relationships, critical thinking, skill development, etc…) for teens and young adults in order to support the transition to college and/or career (Elkind, 2007; Lisko & O’Dell, 2010; McKeown, 2014; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996), there is considerably less research available to speak to perceptions of play as an educational tool by way of a means of increasing school readiness for preschool students. Furthermore, an argument could be made that these soft skills developed as a result of play align closely with what young children need in order to achieve school readiness (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Bruner, 1996; Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009).

Studies such as those completed by Elkind (2007), Epstein (2009, 2014), Helm and Katz (2011), and Rutherford-Hemming (2012) connect learning processes in children, teens, and adults and specifically allude to aspects of constructivist learning. In many of these studies, researchers concurred that active engagement, a necessary aspect of long-term learning, occurred when learning was interest-based, interactive, and allowed for exploration (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, & McLean, 2001; Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009; Piaget, 1929). The presence of active engagement allowed opportunities to practice and extend upon current abilities and experiences in order to perfect emerging skills as well as achieve new skills (Lisko & O’Dell, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, & Denckla, 1996). While generalizations might be advanced regarding findings that emerged from such studies and could be applied to younger children, it would prove difficult to ensure accuracy in those generalizations. Therefore, the overarching research questions guiding this study related to perceptions regarding the overall educational impact play has on a child’s early life, especially considering the drastic increase in rigor and accountability in schools due in large part to

Throughout this chapter, theoretical underpinnings relative to the importance of play as an instructional tool for preschool students are discussed, including educational reform and funding, learning, and school readiness. Other areas examined include developmental appropriateness, Common Core State Standards [CCSS] and Missouri Learning Standards [MLS], value of play, and play through the years. Finally, theories considered in regard to this topic’s theoretical framework of learning theory will be introduced as well as the selected conceptual framework, constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929). In discussing constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929), the researcher will examine constructivism, itself, as well as constructivist curricula examples, meanwhile accounting for benefits and limitations of constructivist learning theory as framed within this inquiry.

**Historical Underpinnings of Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education has a multitude of histories, all of which merge to form today’s early childhood programs and practices. In exploring the historical underpinnings of early childhood education, the following topics will be addressed: educational reform and funding, school readiness, developmentally appropriate practice, CCSS and MLS, value of play, and play through the years.

**Educational Reform and Funding**

With the variety of histories available, one history early childhood education cannot ignore is educational reform and funding. There is much evidence to support the
positive impact early interventions have on a child’s overall educational success (Bailey, 2001; Epstein, 2009, 2014; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). However, in spite of the benefits regarding interventions such as early childhood education, these programs remain an unfunded mandate. On the federal level, programs such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and Title I aim to target young children in order to provide them with a high quality education, whether low in socioeconomic status or developmentally and/or academically delayed (Head Start Reauthorization Act, 2007) but are the only funded mandates. Even with researchers such as Brown (2010) stressing the ultimate goal of such programs is to achieve school readiness for every child, none of these programs are fully funded nor provide a clear definition of what being school ready truly means.

While expectations are high and standards are stringent, funding remains an issue, and it is difficult to provide all of the services necessary to assist these children in reaching their educational potential when there is not enough money to do so (Brown, 2010; Pink, 2005). At the state level (DESE, 2013), there is an unspoken expectation that early childhood education programs be incorporated into school districts, but the lack of funding provided by the state results in the inability of many school districts to provide these types of opportunities. Another concern is that there are currently no direct consequences administered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE] if no such programs are offered (DESE, 2013). The local level encounters similar struggles in that there is a public demand for early education experiences for children yet, all too often, local entities do not have the finances to support such endeavors (Pink, 2005). Herein lays the political battle (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Stone, 2012) between school readiness expectations and funding. And educational reform
focusing on school readiness, though presumably developed with the best intentions, creates detrimental problems across the nation due to inconsistent implementation procedures and funding (Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Brown, 2010; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007; Superfine, 2005).

School Readiness

Unfortunately, funding and reform are not the only issues in early childhood education as society struggles to understand what learning looks like at early stages in a child’s development. What is developmentally appropriate in early childhood is seldom reflected in the teaching of young children (Bailey, 2001; Bennett, 2003; Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Elkind, 2007). Presidential endorsement of early childhood combined with policies such as NCLB (NCLB, 2001) and ESSA (EOP, 2015) as well as educational initiatives like CCSS (NGA, 2009) and MLS (DESE, 2016) have dramatically influenced current practices (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007).

Epstein (2014) said it succinctly, “When teachers expect children to learn, they do” (p. 6). The classroom is a valuable place to learn (Curtis & Carter, 2003) with teachers making meaningful connections to prior knowledge, individualizing lessons and activities to complement children’s developmental levels (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Furthermore, thoughtful questioning provides insight into student perspectives and thought processes and stimulates higher-order thinking skills (Bailey, 2001; Chaille, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), which are necessary components in becoming school ready.

For some time now, a clear and consistent definition for school readiness has eluded researchers, educators, and policymakers alike (Brown, 2010; Duncan et al., 2007;
High, 2008; Vernon-Feagans & Blair, 2006). Nonetheless, this ambiguous objective continues to be a requirement for educational stakeholders in their efforts to provide high quality care and learning opportunities to our nation’s children. Thus, the question still remains: what is school readiness? High (2008) and Vernon-Feagans and Blair (2006) agreed a battle ensues over the minds of young children as school districts and local agencies attempt to define school readiness in respect to their vision and mission statements. When the state and federal levels add in vague expectations concerning what it means to be school ready, this only serves to heighten tensions between districts and local agencies. For the sake of this investigation, the definition for school readiness comes from Copple and Bredekamp (2009), who asserted that as kindergartners, children are expected to arrive equipped with appropriate coping skills, able to negotiate and navigate obstacles and challenges that delay or defer preferred goals as well as to self-regulate behaviors and emotions.

While being prepared academically is also of value, most researchers concur developing social-emotional skills first are of the utmost importance (Bailey, 2001; Chaille, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). According to Bailey (2011), Brown and Vaughan (2010), and Epstein (2009), socially and emotionally competent children are more successful in school and in the workplace, as emotional health equals optimal brain development. Bailey (2011) argued the toxicity created by poorly managed feelings is comparable to the negative impacts on the body and mind caused by smoking cigarettes. Bailey (2011) further laments parents and the home may be where social-emotional learning begins, but teachers and schools are the second. The skills educators model
along with their level of social-emotional wellbeing has a tremendous impact on a child’s
development and academic success (Bailey, 2011; Bandura, 1997; Schweinhart, 2005).

Brown and Vaughan (2010) make a similar assessment asserting a play deficit in
which one has no outlet to express joys, emotions, and fears is comparable to a sleep
deficit, meaning slower brain functions, less rational reactions, less creativity, and less
optimism. Epstein (2009) maintained it is impossible to attain true academic and
personal success without addressing social and emotional skills first. Finally, Elkind
(2007) noted until we acknowledge that we are emotional beings and learn to deal with
constructive feedback regarding that reality, we will continuously have problems, as
emotional illiteracy can ruin families, finances, and health. Research strongly suggests
those children with healthier emotional coping mechanisms create healthier relationships
(Bailey, 2001, 2011; Espinosa, 2002; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996; Schweinhart,
2005). Ultimately, utilization of developmentally appropriate practices (Brown &
Vaughan, 2010) allows for a plethora of opportunities to further strengthen social-
emotional skills in young children (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Espinosa, 2002; Purdie, Hattie, &
Douglas, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), which is one of many reasons that developmentally
appropriate practice is imperative.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

When utilized properly, developmentally appropriate strategies such as the use of
play in schools positively influences our educational system and the learning processes of
children (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), while children who are
taught utilizing developmentally *inappropriate* methods are far less likely to achieve
school readiness and overall educational success (Bailey, 2001; Bruner, 1996; Piaget,
In contrast, if educators apply methods that are developmentally appropriate, they foster the whole child by allowing him/her to self-teach (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962), problem-solve (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980), express emotions, questions, ideas in a healthy manner (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962), and to provide insight into his/her home life and prior experiences (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005).

Nevertheless, there is a common misconception that learning through play cannot be rigorous; then again, if the teacher is facilitating and the classroom is one of shared control, mutual respect, and trust, then play is capable of becoming incredibly rigorous (DESE, 2013). Through play and other appropriate activities, children should be encouraged to take risks and try new things, making connections to previous learning and experiences, whether academic or personal (Epstein, 2009, 2014). Bailey (2001, 2011) further argued that ideas should be valued and relationships should be strong, while Curtis and Carter (2003) emphasized if care and time are taken to develop this type of learning environment, then play becomes a powerful, rigorous educational tool (Weisberg, et al., 2015).

Ultimately, when you combine the power of play (Bailey, 2001; Epstein, 2009) with a rich curriculum (DESE, 2013; Helm & Katz, 2011; Schweinhart, 2005) and a meaningful ongoing assessment tool (DESE, 2010), accountability soars and teachers are held responsible for student growth while remaining developmentally appropriate. While this is the ideal early childhood classroom situation, this is rarely a reality. Due to the implementation of CCSS and MLS, developmentally appropriate practice is becoming a
negative buzz phrase perceived as an obstruction to the required academic focuses on which students will be assessed (Brown, 2010; Madsen, Schroeder, & Irby, 2014; Pink, 2005).

**Common Core State Standards [CCSS] and Missouri Learning Standards [MLS]**

Despite drastic differences in approach, CCSS and MLS along with developmentally appropriate practice all strive for real-world connections. The development of CCSS and then ESSA and MLS stemmed from attempts to resolve weaknesses in the NCLB legislation (NGA, 2009). According to Brown and Vaughan (2010), NCLB “is an admirable (and even necessary goal) to make sure that all children attain a certain minimal level of education…the result has often been a system in which students are provided a rote, skills-and-drills approach to education and ‘nonessential’ subjects like art and music are out” (p. 99). Brown and Vaughan (2010) noted “in many school districts, even recess and physical education have been severely reduced or even eliminated” (p. 99). Elkind (2007) concurred, arguing, “Growing numbers of elementary schools are eliminating recess in favor of more time for academics” (p. xi). Elkind (2007) affirmed “our increasingly test-driven curricula have all but eliminated creative and playful teaching practices” (p. xi).

In contrast to NCLB, CCSS are a set of clear college- and career-ready standards for kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts/literacy and mathematics and were developed by State education chiefs and governors in 48 states that came together to develop them. Initially, 43 states voluntarily adopted and worked to implement the standards, which were designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to either take credit bearing introductory courses in two- or four-
year college programs or to enter the workforce (Common Core State Standards Initiative, Adopted 2010). Though most states chose early adoption, it was mandated that all states move to full implementation of CCSS in the 2014-2015 academic year. With the adaptation to CCSS, a paradigm shift was required as schools moved away from worksheets and memorization towards more brain-based instructional approaches to ensure basic proficiency could be achieved within the standards (Brown, 2010).

Recently, some states have opted to develop their own set of standards. For the state of Missouri, the Missouri Learning Standards [MLS] were developed. The MLS share many similarities with CCSS in that the goal is to provide consistency across the state in order to ensure that all students are working towards identical learning goals. These grade-level and course-level expectations are aligned with the Show-Me-Standards and define the knowledge and skills students need in each grade level and course for success in college, other post-secondary training, and careers (DESE, 2016).

While CCSS and MLS are meant to provide consistency and clarity in understanding foundational learning expectations for students (NGA, 2009; DESE, 2016), the implementation process is much more obscure. As schools struggle to decipher how to prove academic achievement, school leaders and teachers feel the pressure of increasing test scores, which leads to more teacher-directed, close-ended lessons and activities (Brown & Vaughan, 2010). School districts and administrators understood that instructional change of this magnitude (NGA, 2009; DESE, 2016) would require systemic changes as well, though it was not initially clear what form these changes would take and how they would impact current school culture.
The resultant drastic changes in educational legislation and initiatives brought about increased focus on instructional accountability and rigor, and, as an outcome, stakeholders seemed to lose sight of the value of early childhood education (Brown, 2010). Today’s early childhood and general school environment is rapidly changing with the implementation of CCSS and MLS, and, more specifically, the higher accountability and added rigor from CCSS and MLS in combination with more and more children dealing with specific challenges such as poverty and/or learning a second language has negatively altered rather than clarified foundational learning expectations (Brown, 2010; Helm & Katz, 2011). As student populations continue to change, accountability continues to become a growing concern (Epstein, 2014) with an increased focus on discrete knowledge and testable skills (Helm & Katz, 2011). Unfortunately, the value of play is forgotten or schools choose not to focus on play’s necessity under intense school pressures (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 99). Consequently, developmentally appropriate activities such as play have moved down the educational priority list (Brown, 2010; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007).

**Value of Play**

Many researchers (Chaille, 2008; Epstein, 2009; 2014; Piaget, 1929) highlighted the importance of play, including Copple and Bredekamp (2009) who claimed, “Of the many things that skilled teachers do to foster children’s learning and intellectual development, one of the most important is ensuring guidance and ample time for sustained play” (p. 138); this is not always the case with educational stakeholders. The dramatic increase in rigor and accountability in schools relative to NCLB (NCLB, 2001) and ESSA (EOP, 2015) as well as CCSS (NGA, 2009, 2010) and MLS (DESE, 2016)
have given rise to unintentional challenges and pressures to educational stakeholders, resulting in play being perceived as frivolous rather than as a high quality educational tool (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Duncan et al., 2007; High, 2008; Vernon-Feagans & Blair, 2010; Pink, 2005).

According to Brown and Vaughan (2010), play is a catalyst in which “the beneficial effects of getting just a little true play can spread through our lives, actually making us more productive and happier in everything we do” (p. 7). Even upon entering school, free play remains a vital component, as it is necessary for growth, flexibility, and learning (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 99). Consequently, as noted previously, there are disconnects between research and practice when it comes to the value of play.

**Play Through the Years**

While breaching the gap between research and actual practices is essential, it is equally important to discuss how play itself has changed over the years. Piaget (1929) and Vygotsky (1962) agreed that play is an activity in which self-teaching occurs in one form or another. More specifically, a child plays through situations very much like an adult thinks through a situation. Similarly, Elkind (2007) defined play as “our need to adapt the world to ourselves and create new learning experiences” (p. 3). Play, however, has changed over the last several years for a variety of reasons. One reason is, due to safety issues and social changes, children are not allowed to play outside as much as in the past (United States Census Bureau, 2012). With these changes and the issue of both parents working and/or in school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), adult involvement in play has been altered. Furthermore, it does not help that play is often misunderstood by adults who do not comprehend the value it holds in regard to learning (Levin, 2013).
Elkind (2007) argued that education is now viewed as a race to the top as parents intensely compete to get their children in the finest schools, including preschools. Even educational toys are primarily marketed toward the preschool level, as the belief in *the earlier start the better* has become widespread, fueled by the desire to avoid menial jobs for children in the future (Elkind, 2007, p. 34). Children are being pushed toward structure and adult-chosen activities and toys earlier and earlier, so free play is becoming a thing of the past (Elkind, 2007; Weisberg, et al., 2015).

Technology and media have also changed the expression of play, as living in a media-saturated culture requires that early childhood educators find effective ways to promote and encourage children’s healthy development (Elkind, 2007; Levin, 2013). For example, children are playing on the iPad or other mobile devices, and, as a result, much of playtime now translates to screen-time through television and/or video games (Elkind, 2007; Levin, 2013). According to Elkind (2007), “Over the last two decades, children have lost twelve hours of free time a week, including eight hours of unstructured play and outdoor activities” (p. ix). Consequently, interactions and conversation are a huge part of the advantages of play, and more and more families and even schools are missing out on this vital component (Bailey, 2001; Elkind, 2007; Epstein, 2009, 2014).

While technology is exceedingly important, it makes it difficult to detach from such a rich technological culture and make true connections (Levin, 2013), therefore, learning through play dramatically decreases (Bailey, 2001; Epstein, 2014). In addition, as technology tools and software increase, schools insist upon children being exposed early to such equipment, and, while there is value in this, it often replaces opportunities for true play that involves free choice and open-ended activities (Bailey, 2001).
According to Levin (2013), “Information and guidance from the field of media literacy education can help early childhood educators more effectively address both negative and positive ways that media and technology influence young children’s development, learning, and behavior” (p. 63). Consequently, while technology and media have a place in the world of a child’s play, adults must use these tools cautiously and with care.

While the look of play has changed dramatically over the years, the demonstrability that play is irreplaceable when it comes to a child’s learning remains the same (Bailey, 2000; Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962). Because of this, learning theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study.

**Learning Theory as a Theoretical Frame**

A child’s play is directly linked to a child’s learning (Bailey, 2000; Kolb, 1984, 2005; Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962), so learning theory was a logical choice as the theoretical framework considering the focus on constructivist educational practices in this study. In working from a theoretical framework of learning theory, various theories linking play and education were examined, and Heppner and Heppner’s (2004) funnelling technique was used to narrow theories down to the conceptual framework of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory. The following learning theories were examined and analyzed as to their potential in meeting the purpose of this inquiry: situated (Lave & Wagner, 1990), social (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962), structural (Scandura & Scandura, 1980), and experiential (Kolb 1984, 2005). After discussing each of these learning theories, the chosen conceptual framework of constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) and its application to the purpose of this inquiry will be discussed.
Situated, Social, and Structural Learning Theories

There is plenty of relative research available concerning how children learn, for example within situated learning theory (Lave & Wagner, 1990), the argument is made educators should take into account the activity, context, and culture in which learning occurs. More specifically, situated learning theory is defined as learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied, thus learning and doing are inseparable (Lave & Wagner, 1990). It is within situated theory that etic and emic approaches are discussed as well. According to Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini (2013), the approach most often used is an etic approach in which an outsider’s account of cultures is prevalent, such as seeing a particular culture as either collectivist or individualistic. Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) further suggested the issue with this approach is its divided view that reinforces sophisticated stereotypes, while a more emic approach is an insiders’ perspective of a culture, allowing for more insight into cultural intricacies and distinctions. While these elements of learning are important, this particular study is not focused on cultural differences in children, but rather the value of play and how children learn. While culture does have a role in a child’s learning, it is one piece of a much larger puzzle. Therefore, situated learning did not fit the purpose of this particular study, as the focus of situated theory was on culture rather than play.

Another theory considered in conjunction with situated learning theory (Lave & Wagner, 1990) was social learning theory in which Bandura (1977, 1997) expended upon Vygotsky (1962) and honed in on human behavior, emphasizing the importance of observing and modeling behaviors such as attitudes and emotional reactions. Underlying key components of this theory include attention, retention, motor reproduction, and
motivation. Though motivation and emotional relationships are important concepts in learning, social learning theory as well as situated learning theory were not the best fit for this study’s conceptual framework, as they did not comprehensively encompass the overarching research questions regarding the value of play as an educational tool. In other words, these theories, though they share some aspects with constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929), are too narrow for the purpose of this study.

Unlike Bandura’s (1977, 1997) social learning theory, structural learning theory (Scandura & Scandura, 1980) focuses on problem-solving, suggesting that one must first generate the most basic solution and then build upon that solution. Thus, the instructor should encourage students to further develop potential solutions to become more complex until the problem has been successfully mastered and the complete official rule taught. Yet again, while problem-solving (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980) is an essential skill in becoming a lifelong learner, this study required a learning theory where problem-solving is only one aspect of learning, not the entire focus. Consequently, the researcher was searching for a conceptual framework that would comprehensively address the research questions.

**Experiential Learning Theory**

Another theory of interest was Kolb’s (1984, 2005) experiential learning theory. This theory suggests that learning is equivalent to personal change and growth, with the instructor acting as a facilitator. Experience makes learning meaningful (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Bruner, 1996; Kolb, 1984, 2005; Piaget, 1929). This theory includes creating a positive environment conducive to balancing intellectual and emotional growth as well as sharing thoughts and feelings with learners without overpowering conversations.
Experiential learning requires complete student participation in the learning process as well as student control over its nature and direction. Its basis rests upon direct confrontation with practical, social, personal, or research problems and relies heavily on self-evaluation concerning student progress and success (Scandura & Scandura, 1980).

Experiential learning incorporates many elements of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory all surrounding the premise that the brain remembers what the hands do. Both theories strongly encourage opportunities for applicable learning experiences through hands-on learning activities. However, while the two theories share many similarities, constructivist learning theory proved to be the foundation of all of the other considered theories, including experiential learning. Piaget’s (1929) work regarding constructivist learning theory gave birth to the other learning theories considered for this study (Bruner, 1996; Kolb, 1984, 2005; Lave, 1990; Scandura & Scandura, 1980; Vygotsky, 1962). In a final review of the literature and assessing for best fit for the study, constructivist learning theory became the clear choice as it proved to be more inclusive than any other learning theory considered. Also, in early childhood, constructivist theory provides the basis for most teaching approaches used (Bailey, 2001; DESE, 2013; Helm & Katz, 2011; Schweinhart, 2005), so using this theory aligned with the purpose of this inquiry expansively.

**Constructivist Learning Theory**

Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory strongly stresses active learning, constructing new ideas and/or concepts based on either prior or current knowledge, or some combination of the two. Chaille (2008) defined constructivism as “a theory of learning that posits that children construct knowledge through interaction between their
own ideas and experiences in the social and physical world” (p. 5). Similarly, DESE (2013) noted individuals construct knowledge “as a result of dynamic interactions with the physical and social environments” (p. 3). This literature goes on to assert that constructivist learning theory is more about a reorganization of how one thinks as they build upon the known rather than development or a gathering of facts alone (DESE, 2013). Educators must know the children they serve as well as utilizing their prior knowledge.

Teachers are the mainstay of constructivist learning (Piaget, 1929) because they are the educational providers. If they do not embrace the constructivist approach, then fidelity to the curriculum is lost and so are a host of valuable learning opportunities for the children. When implementing constructivist learning theory, the educator should encourage students to discover principles for themselves, promoting active discussion and hands-on opportunities (Bailey, 2001, 2014; Chaille, 2008; Epstein, 2009). Through exploration and opportunities for hands-on learning, children are able to make sense of the world around them and to construct their own knowledge (Chaille, 2008). In allowing children to immerse their five senses into their learning, they are able to take in all aspects of an activity—what they see, what they hear, what they smell, what they feel, and, when safe and appropriate, what they taste. Providing these types of rich experiences through play addresses the needs of the whole child, not just within the confines of academia (Bailey, 2001; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2009, 2014). The students lead activities and the instructor acts as a facilitator in order to extend learning through asking meaningful questions and promoting development of critical thinking skills in a constructivist learning approach (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).
Brown and Vaughan (2010) asserted, “Play allows society to function and individual relationships among many to flourish” (p. 88). Though the look of play has changed as society has changed, the benefits of play remain unchanged.

Along with the changing aspects of play were the changing needs for childcare. “In 2011, 32.7 million children were in a regular child care arrangement while their parents worked or pursued other activities outside of the home” (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Therefore, there has been a paradigm shift as early childhood programs moved away from simple childcare to more academic focused programs with authentic curricula that include extensive lesson plans (Brown, 2010; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Fortunately, a majority of early childhood curricula are founded upon authenticity as they implement constructivist (Piaget, 1929) beliefs. Some constructivist early childhood education curricula examples include HighScope (Schweinhart, 2005), The Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011), and Project Construct (DESE, 2013).

Constructivist Curricula

What does a constructivist curriculum look like? In any quality early childhood curriculum, learning and play are interchangeable (Bailey, 2000, 2011). For example, a key component of HighScope (Schweinhart, 2005) is the concept of discovery learning, which is highly constructivist and intertwines with the concept of play. Discovery learning is all about letting the child explore and find out new information on their own as the adult scaffolds and asks meaningful, guiding questions. According to Ormrod (2008), “Piaget suggested that effective discovery learning should be largely a child-initiated and child-directed effort” (p. 326). Ormrod (2008) expanded further by noting it is more beneficial that these activities be well planned and structured so that children
build appropriate meanings rather than mislearning information. Brown and Vaughan (2010) agreed, arguing that authentic play comes from deep within the child and is not formed or motivated solely by others (p. 104).

HighScope was derived from a 40-year study by Schweinhart (2005) that began in 1962 to assess whether high-quality preschool programs would provide short- and long-term benefits to impoverished African American students. In this study, it was discovered that by age five, 67% of children in the program group had an IQ of 90 or greater, while only 28% of children in the no-program group had an IQ in this same range. Also in the program group, 65% graduated regular high school versus only 45% of the no-program group (Schweinhart, 2005, p. 14). This study provided support to Piaget’s (1929) argument for a constructivist approach used in HighScope heavily utilized constructivist principles resulting in major benefits for the children who participated in Schweinhart’s (2005) 40-year study.

The Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011) is another example of an early childhood curricula. Like HighScope, it also has elements of discovery learning but relies mostly on large projects that span over the course of several days to several weeks. The Project Approach calls for deep investigation and is student initiated, with learners being autonomous and creating representations of their learning through meaningful artifacts (Helm & Katz, 2011, pp. 1-3). Consequently, play has a significant role in the development and individualization of these projects. As Brown and Vaughan (2010) stated, “Real play interacts with and involves the outside world, but it fundamentally expresses the needs and desires of the player” (p. 104). Again, evidence of Piaget’s
(1929) constructivist philosophies through student initiated, hands-on learning experiences is noted.

Finally, a third example of a constructivist early education curriculum framework is Project Construct (DESE, 2013), which is a process-oriented approach closely aligned to state and national learning standards. Because of the constructivist principles that form the basis of this framework, it shares many commonalities with HighScope (Schweinhart, 2005) and The Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011). Similarly, teachers act as facilitators and use child interests along with a set of guiding principles to plan lessons and activities. The guiding constructivist principles are as follows:

1. Children have an intrinsic desire to make sense of their world.
2. Children actively construct knowledge and values by interacting with the physical and social worlds.
3. In their universal effort to understand the world, children’s thinking will contain predictable errors.
4. Children’s development is an interactive and interrelated process and spans the Sociomoral, Cognitive, Representational, and Physical Development domains (DESE, 2013, pp. 3-6).

These guiding principles afford educators flexibility in planning according to child-initiated ideas and interests. The children take the lead and share decision-making responsibilities in the classroom.

In each of the three curriculum examples, Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory is prevalent in the constructivist approaches utilized, including shared classroom control, active engagement between peers and teachers, and developmentally appropriate
hands-on learning experiences based upon children’s individual needs and interests. The power of play is again evident in these curricula as well, as “it [play] integrates our deep physiological, emotional, and cognitive capacities, and quite without knowing it, we grow” (Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 104).

**Benefits and Limitations of Constructivist Learning Theory**

Numerous benefits are noted when it comes to constructivist learning theory. Bailey (2011) encouraged educators to share control and to develop a mutual respect not only among child peers but from teacher to child to parent. Chaille (2008) agreed, children should take ownership of their learning, the rewards become intrinsic, ultimately setting them up for a successful academic future as well as becoming lifelong learners. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) also concurred; stressing constructivism allows children to be critical and creative thinkers and to work on teams collaborating, while Schweinhart (2005) added play trains children at a very early age how to become contributing members of our society. In a constructivist environment, children take initiative and integrate what they learn from different disciplines (Epstein, 2009, 2014), but most of all, they learn flexibility, are eager to learn new skills, and adapt to rapidly changing challenges (Helm & Katz, 2011). Elkind (2007) incorporated play into the constructivist learning theory paradigm, stressing that children need time to exercise their predisposition for fantasy, imagination, and creativity, as these are “the mental tools required for success in higher-level math and science” (p. x). Elkind (2007) highlighted, “The failure to develop these tools is, in part at least, one of the reasons America is falling behind other countries in attracting young people into these fields” (p. x).
Though the benefits are countless, there are limitations to the constructivist learning theory. Those that take on a behaviorist perspective believe strongly in a more authoritative classroom structure with the teacher taking the lead. According to DESE (2013), “This type of approach is evident in many programs that emphasize word and number drills as the best preparation for the academic requirements of elementary school” (p. 2). Behaviorists tend to view constructivism as too soft, meaning the teacher should have the control, as it is not meant to be shared with the children (DESE, 2013). Because child-directed activities such as play dominate this type of constructivist environment, adults question what type of learning is taking place as well as how learning is occurring (Brown, 2010). In many cases, early education classrooms are perceived as childcare rather than recognizing the valuable learning experiences they provide through the constructivist approach. In addition, curricula related to constructivism such as HighScope (Epstein, 2009, 2014), The Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011), or Project Construct (DESE, 2013) are often misunderstood, as up until this point many school districts have taken on the behaviorist approach of teacher-led activities involving lecture and worksheets in order to address the increasing rigor and accountability measures (Elkind, 2007).

In exploring learning theory, which served as the theoretical framework for this study, considered theories included: situated learning theory (Lave & Wagner, 1990), social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1962; Bandura, 1977, 1997), structural learning theory (Scandura & Scandura, 1980), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984, 2005). Each of these learning theories shared commonalities with the chosen conceptual framework, constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929). However, since constructivist learning
theory incorporated many elements of the other theories considered, it provided the most comprehensive lens to use for this study.

**Summary**

Throughout this chapter, historical underpinnings relative to this topic such as educational reform and funding, learning, and school readiness were examined. Other areas referenced relative to rigor and accountability included developmental appropriateness, Common Core State Standards [CCSS] and Missouri Learning Standards [MLS], value of play, and play through the years. Learning theories considered for the theoretical framework were introduced along with highlighting the selected conceptual framework, constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929). In exploring this theory, constructivist curricula, including HighScope (Schweinhart, 2005), The Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2011), and Project Construct (DESE, 2013), were examined as well the benefits and limitations of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory.

In Chapter Three, a description of the research design and methodology utilized in this study is described. Presented in Chapter Four are the research analysis and the study findings. Presented in Chapter Five are the results of the study, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER THREE  
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Based upon the literature reviewed, it became evident there was limited information linking play as an educational tool to overall school readiness. While there is adequate research on the benefits of play (Chaille, 2008; Curtis & Carter, 2003; Epstein, 2009, 2014), and the importance of developing soft skills (i.e., problem-solving, social etiquette and expectations, building relationships, critical thinking, skill development, etc…) for high school students and college freshmen transitioning to college and/or career (Lisko & O’Dell, 2010; Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas, 1996), there is considerably less research on the use of play as an educational tool as a means of increasing school readiness.

The purpose of this concurrent mixed methods study was to explore adult perspectives concerning the role of play in a child’s education through the utilization of qualitative interviews and surveys, which include a Likert scale as well as open-ended questions. The overarching research question for this inquiry is: What is the perceived role of play as an educational tool? Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored participants to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play and the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education. Addressed in this chapter are the research design and methodology, including the following: population and sampling procedures; data gathering tools and
procedures; data analysis techniques; human subjects’ protection; strategies to address issues of quality; and anticipated study limitations.

**Research Questions**

Accounting for the current literature available, the following research questions were developed to guide this study:

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?
2. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?
3. How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?
4. How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?

**Rationale for Use of a Concurrent Mixed Methods Study**

In examining the purpose of this study, the researcher identified a concurrent mixed methods study as the investigation framework simultaneously collecting qualitative and quantitative data, and integrating both types of information in order to analyze and interpret overall results (Creswell, 2009). As rigor and high stake accountability continues to increase in school setting, the expectations of administrators, teachers, and children to perform at advanced levels has increase dramatically (Helm &
Katz, 2011; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). With elevated stress levels, added pressures, and high expectations resulting from legislation such as NCLB and ESSA and/or from standards such as CCSS and MLS, how is play incorporated in the world of early education? Because the overarching research question guiding this study related to the overall educational impact play has on a child’s life, this was not only a societal issue but also a problem of practice. With these concepts in mind, a concurrent triangulation approach allowed for a more comprehensive analysis.

Qualitative research offers a path for investigating the meaning individuals associate with various social or humanistic problems (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005). A qualitative framework promotes the exploration of problems or issues that arise. It is often beneficial to discern and analyze meanings individuals associate with specific problems or situations by affording them an opportunity to provide their unique perspectives, allowing participant beliefs and experiences to guide the study rather than those of the researcher (Creswell, 2009).

With the addition of quantitative data through survey research, the study gained “a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2009, p. 12). A major advantage of this research methodology was that the two data types converged to compensate for potential weaknesses that might arise in utilizing quantitative or qualitative alone (Creswell, 2009). Another advantage was, when used side by side, the results of both qualitative and quantitative data together served to reinforce one another (Creswell, 2009). Patton (2002) concurred, noting that the use of mixed methods can provide breadth, depth, and numerical data that can give a more complete picture of the phenomena under study.
Limitations of a Concurrent Mixed Methods Study Design

This study was not without limitations, such as those relative to research design, sample, setting, and approach. Assumptions were also considered, including assumptions preempting the study as well as personal bias that may have impacted research results.

Limitations

While this study invited a multitude of school district stakeholders in the state of Missouri area to participate, not every stakeholder in the area was able to do so. In addition, because Missouri was the only state involved, the variety of responses may have been less than if the study were expanded to cover a much larger area.

In addition, the research design also lent itself to limitations in that a mixed methods design required extensive data collection, and analysis of such data quantities required a substantial time commitment (Creswell, 2009). Correspondingly, there was some degree of difficulty in comparing the two different forms of data collected in order to decipher results, which is why a categorical matrix was developed. Also related to examining these two forms of data were issues concerning the resolving of discrepancies that arose during the analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005). Finally, inductive analysis lent itself to limitations in that it also took time; occasionally the data hit a dead end, forcing the researcher to reshuffle data and begin again; assigning domains that best describe collected data proved challenging; and there was difficulty in deciding whether more data were needed.

Assumptions

Assumptions guiding the focus of this study related to the educational and career background of the researcher. With a majority of educational and career experiences
involving early childhood education, there was a tendency for the researcher to protect
the young children’s right to childhood, meaning young children do not need to be raised
as mini-adults. According to Creswell (2009), it is important to note that personal bias
(Creswell, 2009) existed in the researcher’s belief that society often misinterprets what
learning actually looks like for young children. More specifically, the researcher
perceived a misconception among members of today’s society that a child’s play holds
few academic gains. What appeared to be merely playing to some was always a form of
learning in the eyes of the researcher. It is also the researcher’s belief that children need
to be taught utilizing developmentally appropriate methods in order to achieve the highest
possible levels of school readiness and overall educational success. However, it is
important to note that the researcher was aware of these preconceived ideas and through
triangulation of data, as well as inductive analysis, the researcher minimized imparting
any form of personal biases upon the data interpretations and findings. According to
Hatch (2002), inductive analysis allows patterns to emerge as the researcher denotes main
ideas to develop into domains. Therefore, collected data were grouped according to the
domains that were developed, essentially sorting and funneling the data into distinct
categories or patterns.

Participants

The researcher executed a quasi-experimental mix design, so participants were
selected according to a purposeful representative sample (Creswell, 2009; Mertens,
2010). Initially, utilizing a purposeful sampling provided a comprehensive interpretation
of participants relative to the nature of their roles, their experiences, and their beliefs
within early childhood education. This type of sampling also permitted the researcher to
set guidelines for the selection of participants to ensure those chosen were optimally suited for the overarching research question being investigated. Specifically, to effectively answer the research questions presented, this study relied heavily on the insight and practice of early childhood teachers and administrators (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Merriam established purposeful sampling on the proposition “to discover, understand, and gain insight . . . [to] select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Thus, the population for this study included early childhood teachers and administrators (i.e., principals or directors) of early childhood programs in the state of Missouri.

For this study, the state of Missouri was divided into four quadrants (Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest), which enhanced the multiplicity of districts’ geographical location and district size. The quadrants were divided by natural barriers, as Interstate-70 served as the boundary between the northern and southern quadrants, and Highway 63 served to divide the eastern and western quadrants. The states of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma served as the far eastern boundaries, while the Mississippi River served as the far western boundary. Finally, Iowa was the far northern boundary and Arkansas served as the far southern boundary.

Within each of these four quadrants, two to three school districts with early childhood programs were randomly selected resulting in ten school districts with early childhood programs being selected. All of the early childhood teachers and administrators within these ten districts were surveyed using an online survey. Subsequently, early childhood administrators (i.e., principals or directors) and teachers from each of the four quadrants who were willing to participate volunteered for one-on-
one interviews. This resulted in a total of three administrative interviews and five teacher interviews. To the extent possible, a balance was achieved regarding equal representation of the different stakeholder roles within the study. This is vital because, according to Patton (2002), there is a focus on diversity among, idiosyncrasies of, and unique qualities exhibited by individuals.

From these various pools of qualifying school districts, gatekeeper letters (see Appendix B1) were sent requesting participation of their early childhood teachers and administrators in surveys and interviews. Next, within this pool of ten school districts, the researcher requested early education administrator and teacher volunteers to interview for a total of eight interviews (n=8), contacting the willing participants by phone to further explain the study, informed consent form, and interview questions. The information was then emailed to the eight interview participants. The letter of informed consent (see Appendix B4) outlined the purpose of the study and the minimal risks involved and sought consent from these participants. Included in this letter was the seeking of permission to visit the school site for the interview and to also observe the participant in their school setting for an extended period of time if and when possible (see Appendix B4).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

In this study, the data were collected in a variety of ways in order to promote triangulation, which contributed to a more comprehensive analysis (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010). In this section, data collection procedures, as well as human subjects’ protection and other ethical considerations, are discussed. In addition, explanations are provided regarding logic behind research decisions made throughout the data collection
Data Collection Procedures

Data collection methods for this study included qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994) and an on-line survey (Fink, 2009; Mertens, 2005), along with observations. The research questions, the study’s conceptual and theoretical framework, and relevant literature informed the survey and interview protocol developed by the researcher.

By conducting eight one-on-one personal interviews with willing volunteers from the 10 participating school districts in Missouri, the researcher aimed to develop a deeper rapport with participants. In this more intimate atmosphere, all individuals received the opportunity to voice their perceptions and to respond without concern that others would judge their opinions or speak over them. While the researcher searched to find the correct number of interview participants, as Seidman (2006) articulated, “‘Enough’ is an interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study and each researcher” (p. 55). Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour and, after the initial interview, follow-up email exchanges and telephone interviews were conducted to further explore emerging themes. The questions for these interviews were determined following the initial analysis of the first interview. Questions were carefully designed, ensuring they were open-ended and objective, which allowed for triangulation of data between sources (Creswell, 2007). Interview questions (see Appendix D2) were created based on the research questions guiding the study, which were ultimately informed by a review of the literature (Galvan, 2013). Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants with the intent of validating information gathered, as
well as to better enable the researcher to accurately transcribe the interaction and participant comments (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006).

Online surveys were the other data collection tool used for the purpose of this study. These surveys averaged approximately 20 minutes and employed forced-choice questions in which participants ranked responses according to a Likert scale. These surveys also employed a series of open-ended questions to gain more qualitative data to accompany the one-on-one interview information. By incorporating surveys that provided both quantitative and qualitative data, the study was strengthened by providing numeric trends along with the detailed views that qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups provide (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010).

**Instrumentation**

Instrumentation consisted of an on-line Likert survey, semi-structured interview protocol conducted face-to-face with early childhood administrators and teachers at their location, and observations. The online survey questions were focused on eliciting early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education and the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool to achieve school readiness. Furthermore, the survey examined the perceptions of the participants regarding how the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations have or have not had an impact the role of play in early childhood education and the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms. The construct validity of the instrument was established through feedback from selected subjects within one early childhood district, not used in the sample. After the original instrument was administered and feedback received, items
on the survey were changed accordingly.

Interview Protocol

Early childhood administrators (i.e., principals or directors) and teachers from each of the four quadrants who were willing to participate volunteered for one-on-one interviews resulting in a total of three administrator interviews and five teacher interviews. The researcher contacted the selected participants to schedule the interview time and location. A letter of confirmation, the interview questions (see Appendix D2), and a letter of informed consent (see Appendix B4) were emailed to each interview participant to confirm the date and time of interview and to provide time for the participants to review and reflect on the questions. Providing questions prior to the interview allowed administrators and teachers time to reflect on their perceptions of the role of play as well as their personal experiences in their early childhood programs. This process assisted them in preparing for the interview, a practice seldom found to skew the results of the interview (Seidman, 1998). An interview protocol form (Appendix D1) was developed to track relevant information concerning the interviewee, data and field notes collected. This tracking of information helps to certify the information gathered is well organized and accessible, allowing for easier confirmation of data gathered (Seidman, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of experience and opinion open-ended questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) relating to the effectiveness of the participant’s preparation regarding cultural responsiveness, education equity, and social justice. Interview questions were cross referenced and color coded using a question key (Appendix E) to note their orientation to the research questions to assist the researcher
with coding of data upon interview completion. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirmed by each participant that their stories were portrayed as intended (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Instructions were given to the participants to contact the researcher to make necessary corrections and changes accordingly. The researcher took field notes during the interview process to record information not reflected on the audio-recordings. Triangulation of the data occurred through the use of rich, thick descriptions provided from the interviews to further explain data obtained from the documents and the observations (Creswell, 2009).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

According to Hatch (2002), “Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (p. 148). Hatch (2002) asserted, “The inductive analysis model is best suited for studies that have generated complex data sets based on postpositivist or constructivist research perspectives” (p. 231). Data for this study were interpreted utilizing inductive analysis as the researcher immersed herself into the data searching for concepts from a constructivist viewpoint. Inductive thought begins with the specific and moves to the general, starting with certain fragments of evidence and piecing them together to form a meaningful whole (Hatch, 2002).

**Quantitative Analysis**

As a mixed methods study, there were elements of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods utilized. To delve deeper into the quantitative side of
this study, all four research questions were addressed by reporting a descriptive analysis of responses to the relevant survey questions. Through the descriptive analyses, collected survey data were organized into a table for each quantitative question showing the percentages of each response. This type of analysis also allowed for reporting of the median response. To utilize descriptive analysis, the response scale was coded on a scale from one to six, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Likert scale survey questions and statements generated were categorical as well as cross-sectional in nature so lent themselves well to quantifiable data (Hatch, 2002, p. 153).

**Qualitative Analysis**

In order to strengthen this study, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously. Qualitative research questions included the following: What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness? How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders? Interview transcripts as well as information collected through online surveys utilizing an open-ended question format were compared and contrasted in order to address these questions. Detailed field notes taken during the interview process also supplied additional support to qualitative interview and survey responses.

Broad categories that emerged were clearly defined and color-coded so that information could be filtered accordingly (Seidman, 2006). Weiss (1994) noted “some coding categories we bring to our studies before ever knowing what the interviews will
produce... Others we bring with us as readiness to interpret respondents' comments in one way or another” (p. 155). Merriam (1998) referred to such classification schemes as etic, meaning schemes generated by the researcher prior to data collection. Although the researcher undoubtedly had certain classification schemes in mind for the research analysis, she specifically sought those of an emic nature, meaning those found in the culture of organizations (i.e., PK-12 educational institutions) themselves (Merriam, 1998). As themes and patterns emerged, the researcher worked to move from narrow to increasingly abstract domains exhibited across the varying data types (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). Data outliers were filtered in two ways: they were color-coded according categories in closest relation as well as to maintain a separate category for all outliers as a means of accounting for that information throughout the analysis process. The researcher organized all data collected and analyzed, whether qualitative or quantitative, into a matrix (Creswell, 2009) according to category for ease of comparison. Developing a matrix allowed for searching both within and across domains for themes and/or patterns, which added complexity, richness, and depth to the data analysis (Hatch, 2002).

**Study Integrity**

Much care was taken to maintain study integrity throughout this process. Reliability and validity checks were completed throughout this study. Validity demands that the researcher “check… the accuracy of the findings” while reliability requires consistency throughout the research (Creswell, 2009, p. 190). These terms are interchangeable with those of “credibility and dependability” (Mertens, 2005 p. 253). To address the issue of validity or credibility within the study the researcher confirmed “the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs [within their organization] and
the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” were exact (Mertens, 2005, p. 254). Interviews were transcribed carefully and completely, including details such as pauses and conversation overlaps. Comprehensive field notes taken during these interviews were meant to catch any additional information. Survey information, both qualitative and quantitative, served to assist in triangulation of data to further attest to validity and reliability.

Because this research was for dissertation purposes, approval of the study and its intended participants was granted through the University of Missouri’s Campus Institutional Review Board. In order to maintain good standing with the Institutional Review Board and to remain ethical, informed consent forms were distributed to all participants and were collected upon being signed.

Throughout this process, it was made clear that participation in this study was completely voluntary and that no compensation would be provided. Procedures were outlined explicitly in order to avoid any misunderstandings (Hatch, 2002). Participants were permitted to decline a response or to leave the study at any time, and names were removed from any interview or focus group transcripts or surveys in order to maintain anonymity. Data were kept in a locked location, inaccessible to anyone but the researcher, in order to maintain confidentiality at all times. Three years after the study’s completion, the data will be destroyed.

Interviews were conducted in the participants’ natural settings as much as possible in attempts to aid the researcher in a better interpretation of participant perspectives (Hatch, 2002). As a white female with a background in early childhood, personal biases relating to those roles did exist. Being an advocate for early childhood
education and having certain life privileges that accompanied being raised in a middle-class home in a small town forced profound reflection and examination of deeply held beliefs. However, the researcher will again note that extreme care was taken in order to avoid imparting any of these beliefs and/or biases upon data interpretations.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness remained a high priority throughout this study. Transcripts from all interviews were examined thoroughly for researcher errors that may have occurred during the transcription process (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Surveys were administered using an online instrument, and great precautions were taken to ensure that responses were unaltered in any way by the researcher and confidentiality was maintained. Data triangulation through the utilization of multiple data sources and the development of a categorical matrix assisted in establishing themes and increasing the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Creswell, 2009). Discrepant information was also accounted for throughout the data analysis process to ensure that all evidence was examined thoroughly. Involving multiple educational stakeholders across the state of Missouri contributed to transferability of findings in the inclusion of a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

**Summary**

The purpose of this concurrent mixed methods study was to explore adult perspectives concerning the role of play in a child’s education through the utilization of qualitative interviews and surveys. Research questions included the following: What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education? What are the perceptions of early childhood
administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness? How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders? How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?

Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored readers to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play and advocated for the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education.

This paper served to address the research purpose and questions guiding this study in greater detail. The population and sample were incorporated, including sampling procedures. Data gathering tools used included interviews and online surveys, and an inductive data analysis approach assisted in the filtering and triangulation of data. Human subjects’ protection, such as ethical considerations for participants and an explanation of the University of Missouri’s Campus Institutional Review Board process, were referenced. Finally, strategies to address issues of quality and anticipated study limitations were provided. Chapter Four presents the research analysis and findings. Presented in Chapter Five are the study results, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER FOUR
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to explore adult stakeholder perceptions regarding the role of play in a child’s early childhood education. In utilizing a constructivist learning theory lens, this study aimed to provide a mirror for adult stakeholders so that they may deeply reflect upon the role of play as an educational tool, even in times of rigor and high accountability. Presented in this chapter are the descriptions of participants and settings, the research analysis and findings, including a review of the study design, data collection methods, conceptual underpinnings, research questions, and process of data analysis as well.

Study Design

For this study, a concurrent triangulation mixed methods approach was utilized in that quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis. As Seidman (2006) asserted, “In order to willingly consent in the truest sense, potential participants must know enough about the research to be able to gauge in a meaningful way whether they want to proceed” (p. 61). Participants were selected according to a purposeful representational sample and using a quasi-experimental design dividing the state of Missouri into four quadrants (Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest) rather than a random sampling (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010). More specifically, study participants were identified according to their current status as early childhood personnel (e.g., administrators or teachers) within the state of Missouri. Finally, the researcher used an inductive analysis process in order to
analyze data, coding for themes and commonalities (Hatch, 2002).

**Data Collection Methods**

Before beginning the data collection process, the researcher secured permission from each district gatekeeper to conduct research and to have access to early childhood stakeholders (such as administrators and teachers) relevant to this study. The researcher then completed the formal University Institutional Review Board application, which included providing information about the purpose and extent of the study. Upon receiving approval from the University of Missouri-Columbia (see Appendix A), the researcher began communications with a designated contact person within each of the 10 participating Missouri school districts in order to administer an online survey and to invite volunteers to complete one-on-one interviews. All early childhood participants received informed consents (see Appendix B) prior to surveys and interviews. Also, following the interviews, participants received a verbatim transcript of their interview upon request and were provided the opportunity to provide feedback by modifying and/or clarifying their recorded responses through the procedure of member-checking (Creswell, 2003). The data were triangulated through on-site, audio-recorded interviews and detailed interview field notes recorded during each interview (see Appendix D).

**Conceptual Underpinnings**

The focus of this investigation was the perceived role of play in times of rigor and high accountability and how the use of play impacts school readiness. Much like learning, learning theory takes on many forms—there is no all-encompassing learning theory that accounts for all learner needs. For the purpose of this study, several learning theories were explored and, using Heppner and Heppner’s (2004) analysis process, the
researcher funneled down and ultimately selected constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) as the appropriate approach for providing answers to the overarching research questions.

Though there is much research evidencing the general benefits of play, there is considerably less research available linking constructivism (Piaget, 1929) and the potential benefits of play in becoming school ready (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005). Constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1929) encourages teachers as facilitators while students lead activities, allowing students the control to solve problems and make choices (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980). This allows the instructor increased opportunities to extend learning through asking meaningful, higher-order questions and promoting development of critical thinking skills (Bailey, 2001, 2011; Piaget, 1929).

Research Questions

Research questions guiding this study included:

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?
2. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?
3. How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?
4. How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and
Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?

Process of Data Analysis

Audio-recorded, one-on-one interviews were conducted with three administrators and five teachers currently working in the early childhood field. During these interviews, detailed noted were taken as well. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Interview transcriptions were shared with participants as a means of verifying accuracy of words and intent to the extent possible. Prior to these interviews taking place, each participant received information regarding the research study in addition to an informed consent describing participant rights.

Furthermore, online surveys went out to the early childhood stakeholders (administrators and teachers) in the 10 participating Missouri school districts. Survey participants also received information regarding the study as well as informed consents describing participant rights prior to participating in the study. Survey participants also received information regarding the study as well as informed consents describing participant rights prior to participating in the study.

Survey data was collected and stored by the on-line survey provider. The researcher did not request any identifying information from respondents in order to protect and ensure anonymity, but the on-line service provider treated each respondent as unique. Each respondent was assigned a unique, random number as an identifier in order to prevent duplicate responses. Upon completing the data collection process, the researcher closed the on-line survey, thus removing access from the public.
All data were examined and participants were assigned the following codes (see Appendix F): administrator 1 interview participant (A1), administrator 2 interview participant (A2), administrator 3 interview participant (A3), teacher 1 interview participant (T1), teacher 2 interview participant (T2), teacher 3 interview participant (T3), teacher 4 interview participant (T4), and teacher 5 interview participant (T5). In addition, survey participants received the code (SP) with a number from 1 to 92 attached in order to represent all 92 participants.

**Settings**

Online survey instruments were distributed to early childhood teachers and administrators within the 10 Missouri school districts that returned gatekeeper permissions by an assigned district point person. This was done by forwarding an email from the researcher that contained an overview of the study, informed consents, and the survey link. Surveys were administered in May 2016, and the window remained open through September 2016 in order to capture responses from any new early childhood staff hired over the course of the summer.

For the one-on-one interview process, early childhood teachers and administrators were asked to contact the researcher via phone or email if they were willing to volunteer to participate. Eight volunteers participated in interviews, representing three of the 10 Missouri school districts and a total of five different buildings within those three districts.

**School District 1.**

In general, this school district has developed many programs that address the significant learning that occurs from birth through age five, including high quality early childhood classrooms designed to meet families’ needs as well as Parents As Teachers.
The elementary school observed during the research and interview process was set in a charming, small town and served students age three years through grade five. More specifically, the early childhood program served between 260 to 300 students throughout the year, while there were approximately 440 kindergarten through fifth grade students within the building. The early childhood program hosted special needs students, Title I students, as well as preschool students who were developmentally on target serving as peer models. Major guiding principles for the early childhood program within this elementary building included the following:

- Parents are vital to the education of their children;
- Every effort will be made to offer a full continuum of early childhood services that are appropriate for children ages three to five and their families;
- The early childhood program will form partnerships with community agencies in order to provide additional resources and services for children ages three to school entry;
- A long lasting partnership will be formed between parents and the school district with a shared focus on each child’s education.

There were no requirements to gain entry into the school building. However, visitors were asked to report to the main office in order to sign in and identify reasoning behind the visit. Staff in this building were friendly, and the positive culture was very welcoming. Children and families were smiling and approached staff with a high level of comfort. The environment was also warm, with labeled photographs of children, examples of student work, and objectives for the accompanying lessons posted on
classroom bulletin boards. Being a newer facility, the space was well-organized, bright with a lot of natural lighting, and clean.

**School District 2.**

Within this school district, early childhood opportunities are well supported, and there is a wide array of programs available to children and families to meet each family’s diverse needs. Three different buildings were observed during the interview process, each of which were older but well cared for. Also, in order to gain entry into each of these three buildings, visitors were required to show state-issued photographic identification as well as to explain their need for entry. Upon gaining entry, you immediately came upon the front office and were required to sign in.

**Building 1.** Set within a middle-class neighborhood, the first building was fairly quaint, serving approximately 350 students ranging from age three to grade five, with a variety of murals depicting mascots and elements of school spirit on the walls. Staff, children, and families greeted each other warmly and shared events that had occurred over the weekend. The culture was a collaborative one, as teachers and other building staff visited in the hallways about various lesson plans and classroom management strategies that they found to be successful.

**Building 2.** The second building was the oldest building of the three from this district and was set in an area of town known to be of lower socio-economic status. Children ages three to five years were served here, and the population consisted of both early childhood special education students as well as Head Start students. While the facility had some areas that required attention, the building was clean and had children’s work colorfully displayed on hallway bulletin boards. A large screen display greeted
visitors in the foyer, presenting pictures of building leadership, teachers, and school rules. The classrooms were bright, but there was a feeling of slight tension in the atmosphere. Overall, teachers in this facility appeared more stressed, as several projected a more firm presence and had a tone of frustration and hurry in their voices as they spoke to children and other staff. Despite this, children and families seemed comfortable in their interactions with staff, but there was a stiffness in these interactions that was not observed at the other buildings.

**Building 3.** The third building in this district, lying on the edge of the district’s northern border, was also an older, fairly simplistic facility that had been remodeled within the last 10 years. With this said, upon entering the building, you had a feeling of warmth. The ages served in this building ranged from as young as six weeks old up to age five years. The student population served was a combination of Early Head Start, Head Start, and full parent pay, meaning those families simply looking for a high quality early education program. Staff were welcoming, smiling and visiting with one another as well as with any children and families that entered the building. Conversations seemed to occur at a deeper level, as families shared more intimate details about their lives and how those details might impact their children throughout the school day. Everyone worked together to accomplish tasks such as laundry and meal time duties. Student art work, projects, and photographs splashed the walls and bulletin boards. The overall environment was calm and comfortable.

Though there were slight variances in student demographics for each of the three buildings, the predominant student demographic for each was White Non-Hispanic, though only slightly higher than the African-American student population. The only
major variance between the three buildings was that the third building also had a sizeable Hispanic student population that fell just below the African-American population percentage.

**School District 3.**

This school district housed an early childhood learning center that served children ages birth to five years old. This center was divided fairly evenly between early childhood special education students and typically developing students who served as peer models. The center also offered Parents As Teachers services. While the center was small, consisting of only seven classrooms, it had much to offer. Teachers were social, acting as facilitators by allowing children to take ownership of their learning and decisions. Students that the researcher came in contact with were confident and willing to explore the environment around them. Interactions seemed genuine and warm. The facility was clean, organized, and well lit, and, much like the other buildings, it was decorated with student work and projects.

**Participants**

Initially, 20 Missouri school district Superintendents were contacted in order to request participation in this research study. Of those 20 districts, the researcher ultimately received gatekeeper permissions from 10 Missouri school district Superintendents, meaning that 50% of the school districts contacted returned gatekeeper permissions to participate in the study, while 15% of districts declined participation and 35% of districts did not respond to either the initial letter or follow-up letters.

While online surveys went to all early childhood staff from the 10 participating Missouri school districts for a potential total of approximately 300 survey participants,
the researcher received 92 complete online survey responses that were utilized in the data analysis. Though this return rate of completed surveys was only 31%, 100% of the participating Missouri school districts had staff that accepted the informed consent and responded to the survey.

For the interview process, a total of three administrators and five teachers, all of whom currently work in the early childhood field, participated. Of the eight interviews, one administrator and two teachers were from the same building serving preschool through grade five within their school district. Two administrators and two teachers all hailed from another, much larger school district, though one administrator came from a preschool through grade five building, one administrator supervised a large early childhood center serving children ages three to five years, and the two teacher interviewees worked together in a sizeable early childhood center with children aged six weeks through five years. The final interview participant was a teacher from yet another school district who taught in a very small early childhood center serving children ages three to five. As the following interviewee profiles will illustrate, each participant was common in that s/he all currently work in the early childhood field; otherwise, there was rich variation in experiences and personal backgrounds. The demographic data for interview participants including gender, years of experience in education, job responsibility/area(s) of certification, and school size are summarized in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>Completing 1-5 years</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completing 6-10 years</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Certification</td>
<td>Infants to 2-year-old classroom</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-5 year old classroom</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Level Administrator (PK-Gr 5)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Level Administrator (PK only)</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central Office Administration</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>Less than 100 students</th>
<th>12.5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Between 100 to 300 students</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Between 300 to 500 students</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 500 students</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Demographic Data of Survey Participants.*

**Administrator 1.**

Currently in her eighteenth year in education and in her seventh year as a principal, this administrator is in an elementary building serving preschool through grade five students. Prior to this, she taught first grade and fourth grade in two different districts in the area. She recently completed her doctoral program and is also mom to a 13-year-old daughter. She was professional yet personable throughout the interview. Her demeanor remained relaxed through the process. In discussing her philosophy about student learning, she stated the following:

I think each student really learns at their own pace. I know that we write individualized educational plans for our students who are struggling and who have special needs of some sort, but almost every child could use an IEP because each child learns so much differently than any other child.
In observing interactions between this administrator and those in her building, she appeared to carry this theory of meeting the needs of the individual not only with students but with the adults in the building as well.

**Administrator 2.**

This administrator went to Southeast Missouri State University for her undergraduate degree and received certification in elementary education with a concentration in early childhood. She began her career as a third grade teacher and taught for five years in the same third grade classroom. This administrator then took a position as principal within the same building in which she taught third grade and served in that position for four years. Recently, her school district opened a new elementary building serving approximately 700 to 740 students, and she is in her second year as principal there. Though this administrator is young, she was professional and knowledgeable. In describing her philosophy about how students learn, this administrator said:

I think it varies for every child. I think every kid learns differently. I think that there are best practices, and building relationships with kids would probably be my number one effectiveness strategy. I think that if teachers and kids have a good relationship and they feel like they're in a safe, trusting environment, they're more likely to learn. I think that kids need feedback and they need to hear what they do well and how they can get better.

Throughout the interview, this administrator was very open about her expectations of staff as well as areas where she may need to loosen her grip on instructional practices.

**Administrator 3.**

This administrator is the principal of an early education center with the school district and is in her fifteenth year in education. Prior to coming to this district, she was a principal in preschool through grade six buildings for two different districts. These were
small, rural districts with a total student population of approximately 450 to 475, which is
close to the number of students served in her current building. The current building is an
early education facility serving children ages three to five years old. In her philosophy
about student learning, this administrator noted:

I think that goes back to each student’s different and each student learns in a
different way. Some students learn best through play, some students are hands-on
learners, some are visual learners. I myself am a visual person. You can tell it to
me 50 million times but until I see it in writing, I’ve got nothing.

Throughout the interview, this administrator shifted around in her chair quite a bit,
gesturing emphatically, and spoke with candor and enthusiasm. She recognized that there
were areas she was still learning about as a professional in the field of early education,
especially since the bulk of her prior experience had been with older children.

**Teacher 1.**

An early childhood teacher since January of 1980, this teacher started out with the
school district Head Start program as a teaching assistant at age 18. Along the way, this
teacher had a mentor that pushed her to go to school, and Head Start funded her college
coursework as well as her Child Development Associate [CDA] credential. At that time,
lead teachers qualified for the position with a CDA credential alone. She was the pilot
person for this CDA-only requirement, and, because of her success in the classroom, the
decision came that a CDA alone would qualify someone to be a lead teacher. Thus,
several other teachers were hired with the CDA-only credential. With the prompting of
her mentor, this teacher pushed herself to continue college coursework, so she eventually
got her Associate’s degree in Child Growth and Development. The center in which this
teacher works serves infants through age five years, with a total student population of
approximately 200 children. This teacher was thoughtful and careful with her wording
during the interview, taking a few moments to process before responding to questions.

According to this teacher, children learn through the following:

I just think they're active in their world and that learning takes place in every part of your day. There's not anything ... Lunch ... You wake up. You get up in the morning. You look out the window and you see the birds and the sun. There's just something, there's always something in your day and that, hopefully, I think that parents can facilitate that with their child. I think that's why programs like parents and teachers that teaches families at how important they can be and that you don't talk at, you talk with your kids.

Teacher 2.

This teacher worked in early childhood for 23 years. She has been a two-year-old teacher for 20 of the 23 years that she’s taught. Prior to this, she ran an in-home daycare and has always focused on children. She is a mother of three and a grandmother of seven. She has been married for thirty-nine years, and she has lived in the same town her entire life. She was a stay at home mom until she began working for Head Start. At her center, they serve as young as six weeks up to age five years and have a total of 16 classrooms. This teacher believes in the following regarding student learning:

I think they learn by exploring, and taking opportunities that they normally don't get at home, by I think they learn through their senses, by exploring. Just taking opportunities of things that we present to them. I think play is very valuable. I think it's the most important part of the day, because children, they can explore.

Throughout the interview, this teacher sat rigidly in her chair and nervously repeated herself. However, as soon as the audio-recorder turned off, her demeanor quickly became more relaxed.

Teacher 3.

This teacher comes from an accredited center serving about 700 children in general early childhood as well as early childhood special education. They utilize the pure model philosophy in which the children are intermingled, meaning half the children
in each classroom have an Individualized Education Plan [IEP], while the other half do not and serve as peer models. The center follows the Missouri Preschool standards on which their curriculum is based, and all staff are trained in Project Construct.

Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy services are offered to better serve the early childhood special education students. Also, they are a gold standard Positive Behavior Support [PBS] building. In her eagerness to discuss details about her building, this teacher neglected to share many details about herself and/or her professional experience. She did share, however, that she has been in the classroom for 15 years. When asked about how children learn, this teacher commented:

> I think it’s a complicated process honestly. I think kids... There is multiple ways kids learn. Some people learn... Like they talk about multiple intelligences and how kids learn. I think you have to know your kids really well and know what works for them. What works for child A is not always gonna work for child B. I think the differentiated learning is kind of what we need to focus in on. You have to know your developments, honestly. If you know the progression of development you know how to provide opportunities.

During the interview process, this teacher immediately responded to questions and seemed excited to share her thoughts.

**Teacher 4.**

This teacher is in her tenth year of teaching. The first two years, she taught third through fifth grade, serving students who were severely handicapped. However, for the last eight years, she has worked as an early childhood special education teacher in a preschool through fifth grade building serving approximately 50 children. This teacher holds a Bachelor’s degree in Special Education for K-12, 1-6 Elementary Certification, and a Masters in Special Education and Special Administration. Two years ago, she was moved to a brand new building in which the early childhood program has their own wing.
while still remaining attached to the larger kindergarten through grade five building.

Throughout the interview, this teacher was frank and to the point. In discussing how children learn, this teacher said:

I think they learn through cooperation, through the teachers, small groups the best. I think the whole group, the teacher teaches to the class I think is ineffective. I think there's times for that but I think the smaller group level of learning where the students learn from each other. It's my experience I will see students say something to another student and they pick it up a lot faster than the way I described it earlier.

**Teacher 5.**

This teacher is in her eleventh year in education. While she taught kindergarten her first year, she has been teaching first grade for the last 10 years. The building she works in serves preschool through grade five students, and the preschool classrooms are broken out by age three classrooms and age four classrooms. She graduated from Southeast Missouri State in 2005 with a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a concentration in early childhood. In 2011, this teacher finished her master's degree in early childhood curriculum. This teacher was energetic and provided lengthy explanations throughout the interview process. This teacher holds the following philosophy regarding how children learn:

I guess really my whole theory is just meet the needs of those kinds of learners in the early childhood classroom. Very rarely do I have a kiddo who's solely auditory. They really grasp things whenever I bring out the manipulative's or we do a really cool science experiment, or they can get up and chant their word wall word as opposed to writing them 50 times each. That's just what I think I guess.

The interview with this teacher was very conversational, and she repeatedly referenced a longing for simpler times in education when teachers had more control over the path to meeting district objectives and state standards.
Quantitative Data Analysis

In analyzing quantitative data collected through the online survey, the researcher developed a descriptive analysis using the frequency distribution of responses received. Survey questions included a combination of open-ended responses as well as the following rating scales: 1) Strongly Agree; 2) Agree; 3) Somewhat Agree; 4) Somewhat Disagree; 5) Disagree; and 6) Strongly Disagree. Quantitative survey questions were grouped in a table format based on the overarching research questions they addressed. Each table then listed out percentages for each of the six possible responses ranging from 1 “Strongly Agree” to 6 “Strongly Disagree.” In addition, the median response for each question was included in the corresponding table as a means of summarizing whether respondents had the tendency to agree or disagree.

Research Question One asks, “What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?” Depicted in Table 1 are the quantitative data from online survey responses relating to this study’s first research question.

Table 1
Responses to Research Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item #</th>
<th>Likert Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Role of Play</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>83.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the survey, respondents had to rate to what degree they agreed or disagreed that play has an educational role in the classroom on a 1 to 6 point Likert scale. The results were that 83.52% of respondents (76 out of 92) “Strongly Agreed” (1) that play does have an educational role in the classroom (see Table 1). Survey respondents were also asked to rate on the same 1- to 6-point scale to what degree they believe play serves multiple functions vital in a child’s education and development. The results mirrored the previous survey prompt, with 83.52% of respondents (76 out of 92) selecting “Strongly Agree” (1) that play does serve multiple functions in a child’s education and development (see Table 1).

Research Question Two asks, “What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?” Exhibited in Table 2 are the quantitative data relating this study’s second research question.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item #</th>
<th>Likert Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 Play as Ed Tool</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Again using a 1 to 6 point Likert rating scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” (1) to “Strongly Disagree” (6), survey participants were asked to rate the degree to which they believe that increases in rigor and accountability have resulted in the inability for play to function as an educational tool. Interestingly, the median survey participant response at 52.75% (48 out of 92) was “Strongly Disagree” (6) (see Table 2). In contrast, the following survey prompt stated that the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations do not allow for play in the classroom. The median response at 32.97% (30 out of 92) was that survey participants “Somewhat Agreed” with this statement (see Table 3).

Research Question Three seeks to answer the following: “How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?” Displayed in Table 3 are the quantitative data from the survey in relation to the third overarching research question being examined in this study.

### Table 3

**Response to Research Question 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item #</th>
<th>Likert Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 MLS &amp; K3</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Play</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32.97%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the data collected, there is an overall perception that the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations somewhat discourage play. In a survey prompt stating, “The Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations do not allow for play in the classroom”, the median response rating at 32.97% (30 out of 92) was “Somewhat Agree” (see Table 3).

Research Question Four asks, “How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?” Demonstrated in Table 4 are the survey data collected in regard to this research question.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item #</th>
<th>Likert Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 MLS &amp; K3</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact Constr.</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N= 92 participants responding to survey item

Data collected somewhat suggests the perception that Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have a negative impact on the use of constructivist learning theory within the early childhood classroom. The
median survey response rating at 30.77% (28 out of 92 responses) was “Somewhat Agree.” It is also worth noting that the second highest response was “Agree” at 21.98% (20 out of 92 responses) and the third highest response at 15.38% (14 out of 92 responses) was “Strongly Agree.”

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

In reviewing qualitative data collected through open-ended survey questions, the researcher developed a spreadsheet that contained all survey responses together for ease of inspecting them for trends and themes. One-on-one interview transcripts were also closely examined in order to identify emerging themes. The researcher first went through the survey spreadsheet followed by each interview transcript and noted main ideas in the side margins. The researcher then returned to these documents to color code common themes that emerged.

Once both sets of data, quantitative and qualitative, were analyzed separately, the researcher developed a categorical matrix in order to merge both data sets and allow for a search within and across domains for themes and/or patterns using inductive analysis. This process assisted in adding complexity, richness, and depth to the data analysis (Hatch, 2002) while also allowing for triangulation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play is learning</th>
<th>Barriers to using play as educational tool</th>
<th>MLS &amp; K-3 expectations somewhat discourage play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academics</strong></td>
<td>▪ Letter/sound knowledge</td>
<td>▪ Seat work replaces play-based learning in kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Numbers/math concepts</td>
<td>▪ Teaching to the test mind-frame takes over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Communication and language skills</td>
<td>▪ MLS lay out concepts to be addressed and tested on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Physical skills</td>
<td>▪ District lays out curriculum and pacing expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Meaningful exploration</td>
<td>▪ Kindergarten continuously becoming more rigorous and pushing down on preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Application opportunities in play</td>
<td>▪ Teachers feel need to bridge learning gap between preschool and kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Reinforces taught concepts</td>
<td>▪ Administrators don’t understand children’s social-emotional needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Fine motor skills</td>
<td>▪ Not covered well, if at all, in Missouri Learning Standards or curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Administrative pressure to cover academics only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Administrative pressure to stick to curriculum and testable items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social-emotional</strong></td>
<td>▪ Building relationships</td>
<td>▪ Narrow academic educational focus due to assessments and data expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Turn taking</td>
<td>▪ Stifling natural curiosity and joy in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Sharing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Learning social expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Interactive opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Communication skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Role play opportunities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Strengthen coping strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem-solving</strong></td>
<td>▪ Discover</td>
<td>▪ Math concepts have problem-solving, but lose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Explore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Trial and Error</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developmentally Appropriate Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Individualization and Differentiation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Measuring Student Achievement &amp; Growth</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-paced by child</td>
<td>- No time to slow down pacing or further challenge children</td>
<td>- Push down due to state assessments and data expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Adaptable by child</td>
<td>- Parents or upper administration don’t understand that play is learning.</td>
<td>- No time to incorporate play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Addresses all learner types</td>
<td>- Administrators worrying about overall outcomes rather than each individual child</td>
<td>- Push for academics in preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not teaching to any test</td>
<td>- Rigid assessments</td>
<td>- Tests and assessment create crunch for instructional time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Pacing and expectation to move forward reduces individualization</td>
<td>- No time for child interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Lack of time for individualization and differentiation</td>
<td>- Strip children of autonomy and ownership of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- District and administrative pressure regarding scores</td>
<td>- State and Federal funding impacted by scores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Experience in failing**
- **Imagination/creativity**
- **Negotiation skills**
- **Direct teaching and “dittos” don’t allow for problem-solving opportunities**
- **Less interaction with teacher-directed than through play, so lost problem-solving opportunities**
- **Critical thinking opportunities**
- **Test scores and how they reflect on district**
- **District demands**
- **State and Federal funding impacted by scores**
- **Teacher and Administrator evaluations impacted by scores**
- **Too many common assessments given, taking away play opportunities**
Upon completing the matrix as a means of triangulating data, the researcher then linked open-ended survey and interview responses back to the overarching research questions with which they best corresponded.

**Research Question 1.**

When provided an opportunity to include an open-ended response relating to Research Question One, educational and developmental functions of play, survey responses such as, “Children learn through play. When they play, they are discovering, problem solving, building relationships, and gaining knowledge from others” (SP2), and, “They discover and learn new things, even with a toy they have played with before. They can learn math, physical and cognitive skills” (SP1), confirm the belief that play is a form of learning. Other survey respondents referred to the child’s ability to adapt play to a pace that best fits their needs, as noted in this concise survey response, “Play allows children to explore the world at their own pace” (SP7). Still, other survey participants conveyed a message of play holding a major role in a child’s learning, as seen in this response, “Play promotes communication, language development, social development, imagination, problem solving skills, fine and gross motor skills, adaptive skills, cognitive skills, empathy, compassion and so much more!” (SP58), as well as this response from SP13,

Skill development, social development, and creativity. Play is the crucible in which imagination and creativity can be cultivated and expressed. Play with other children is critical for the development of social skills. Learning occurs in all areas of development as young children play.
Interview participants were also asked to explain their view of play. Though responses varied, impressively, the perception that play is learning was shared among all interviewees. A1 had the following to say about her view of play as an educational tool:

I think that definitely play is one of the first pieces that teachers need to explore when they're introducing a new subject matter or a new tool in the classroom. Even in 3rd grade, I believe play is an important part of introducing any new math manipulative. Children need the opportunity to explore or play with that math manipulative before they start using it as a tool, just so that can be totally out of their system so that they can use it for its intended purpose. In kindergarten, I see play as being one of the most important ways to teach our children to socialize with each other, to collaborate with each other, to problem solve, and to learn how to have respectful conversations with each other.

Though more succinct, T2 agreed that play has a large role in the learning process, as she stated:

I think play is very important. I think that's how the number one way that children learn. I mean they have the hands on experience. That is a child's work. Just through the opportunities and experiences that we provide them, they learn at their level. They learn through their interests. They learn through handling, through problem solving, and I think it's very valuable.

Finally, T5 shared with the researcher:

I feel like not only should we worry about the standards but I feel like we need to develop a well-rounded citizen. I feel like play and social skills should be a big part of the classroom. Teaching them how to resolve conflict and take turns and have good sportsmanship. I guess really just being able to have those social cues and a good tactful student.

**Research Question 2.**

Several open-ended survey responses regarding barriers that prevent play from being used as an educational tool repeatedly referenced the state standards, assessments, and data as a barrier, as seen in the following response from SP22, “Time constraints is a big role as to why play is reduced. Another is data, assessment, and expectations from multiple entities with rules and guidelines that vary.” Another, albeit lengthier, survey
response from SP34 makes it clear that s/he also feels the pressure from state standards, assessments, and data, as s/he stresses,

When we focus on very specific learning outcomes and place importance on rigid assessments and their scores, we place educators in a situation where they begin teaching with the test in mind, rather than teaching with learning in mind. We also remove from children the opportunity to learn according to their interest. Children are naturally curious, but their interests may not align with the goals of the assessment. When we force children to follow our educational goals, we strip them of autonomy and ownership of their education. When teachers are focused on a set of strict expectations and objectives, the educational focus is narrow. We know, based on research, that when we provide children the opportunity to explore in a variety of ways and areas, more neural connections are created and the neural connections that result are much stronger. Narrowing the focus results in fewer and weaker neural connections, as well as stifling their natural curiosity and joy in learning.

Interview participants also discussed barriers to utilizing play as an educational tool, including comments about the state standards and assessments among other barriers. For example, when asked if she believed there were any barriers preventing the use of play as an educational tool, T5 responded:

...our new teacher evaluation system has 32 points to it and we have to set teacher goals and curriculum goals and if you don't meet those goals then that goes against you on your observation which stays in your permanent HR file. A lot of people, they're so worried about student growth and their data scores that there's really not a lot of time for that fun socio-dramatic, like I said any kind of incorporation anymore. Used to be an observation was, "I want to walk in your classroom and see students being engaged and students may be doing a cooperative learning activity or the student matter, making it a really creative lesson plan," and now I don't feel like it's any of that. I feel like now it's all based on student data and growth, which is really sad, especially since my own two kiddo's are going through this new system.

A3 also voiced concerns about data and assessments among other things that might prevent the use of play as an educational tool in early childhood classrooms. She was quick to respond with the following:

Absolutely. There is a huge emphasis on data and there's a huge emphasis on assessment which is where we get our data from. In my personal opinion, it's too
large because there's always that possibility that the day that you're taking the data is the day that the child witnessed a horrific event in their home or didn't sleep last night or didn't eat that morning and their data's going to be skewed because they're hungry or they're tired or they're scared and so they're not truly showing us what they know or can do. I think that by everything being so data-driven . . . which is understand its purpose. . . . but I think that we're always looking for the scores, we're always looking for the data to support what we're doing. I think that gets in the way big time of play because I'm not certain how you take data on play when a kid is. . . I don't know how you measure creativity. I don't know how you put a number on that.

Administrative expectations also surfaced as a perceived barrier repeatedly throughout both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This is evidenced in the following online survey responses such as that from SP53 as s/he stated, “Upper administration. One year they came in and simply took all of the toys out of the kindergarten classroom.” SP64 also suggested that administration acted as a barrier to the use of play in the classroom in noting, “Decision making happening further and further from the classroom - top down.” Finally, SP46 explains, “The greatest barrier is when administrators do not see the importance of play as an educational tool. Teachers are afraid to allow play because it may cause them to have poor evaluations.”

Similarly, interview participants echoed much of the concerns about administrative expectations acting as a barrier to using play in the classroom, as can be seen in A2’s response:

I'm a strong, strong advocate for academic focus, and so I am 100% guilty of pushing my teachers, "Focus more on academics, focus more on academics," and I forget that play piece is so important.

T1 also referred to feeling a “push” from administration in her comments below:

There were [was] some of that push that comes from other directions and they're handed to you and you're trying to figure out how you're going to twist it and fit it to your needs and what you think the kids can use, get best out of it.
Multiple survey respondents referenced misconceptions about play as an educational tool, suggesting that parents, administrators, and/or even some teachers may not recognize that children learn through play. This was apparent in the following open-ended survey response regarding barriers to using play as an educational tool in the early childhood classroom:

As adults, we may not always see the vital learning that is occurring because we become focused on the specific objectives and how and when those "should" be occurring. When we intervene and impart our version of learning upon the child, we deny them the opportunity to reach that knowledge in an organic and meaningful way (SP34).

Correspondingly, SP41 also addressed the fact that there are adults in our society who do not understand developmentally appropriate practice, as evidenced in his/her following response:

In my understanding of & experience of how children grow and learn PLAY should never be removed from the classroom setting. Barriers are created by those who do not have a true understanding of how children develop. Especially administrators who are looking for a[n] outcome and not working with children on their personal level.

Finally, SP66 also agrees that early childhood stakeholders may not understand how play can equate to learning opportunities in his/her comments below:

Because of the increase in rigor and accountability in education these days, it is difficult for many of those who are not in direct contact on a day to day basis with our children to see the benefits of play. They seem to believe that play is simply an act of 'having fun' and not a way in which our children can learn.

Likewise, interview participants also mentioned adult misconceptions related to the educational role of play. In her interview, A2 alluded to parents’ misconceptions about play in the following response:

Sometimes I have to step back and make sure that I give the teachers the autonomy to do that [incorporate play], and I think a lot of times the barrier of play, and I know just perceptions of parents in the community, I don't send my
kids to school to play, I send my kids to school to learn. While that's 100% true, it's our job as educators, I think, to teach the parents that yes, in your opinion they're playing, but they're also learning.

T2 also noted the misconceptions that parents hold regarding play as an educational tool, as seen below:

I know some parents still question that [play] a lot. I think sometimes teachers shy away from it [play] a little bit, because of how parents opinion. Parents don't quite agree with that. When we say play, we mean work. When they [parents] say play, they're more thinking, well why not work? I think it can be a barrier.

**Research Question 3.**

Open-ended survey responses related to Research Question Three that aligned with the perceived negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on play in the classroom include those such as the following response:

These standards push children beyond what they are developmentally capable impacting competence and confidence. Politicians are forcing implementation of expectations that children are not ready for. Competence is gained through self-initiated play, exploration, and teacher guided practice. Seat work as forced by implementation of standards based curriculum is not allowing natural development to occur in our children. Politicians need to do a little early childhood research. I think they might have some "light bulb" moments (SP43).

Many survey respondents, but not all, agreed with this sentiment that state standards and grade school student performance expectations are pushing down into the early childhood field. SP17 states, “As kindergarten becomes more rigorous, so do the expectations of preschool. Because of the developmental differences between preschool and kindergarten children, preschool programs attempt to bridge the gap.” Similarly, SP88 suggests,

So much has to be taught. Many do not believe there is time for play. Newer teachers have been taught differently in college than older teachers. The pendulum is swinging back towards more play. Children are experiencing stress
and have more behavioral problems because they are not allowed to move and explore their surrounding[s]. Preschools are what kindergarten used to be. Kindergarten is what first grade used to be.

With this said, there may be a light at the end of the tunnel according to SP88’s response. S/he notes that s/he feels that the pendulum is swinging back towards play. Interestingly enough, the interview participant responses were more mixed as to the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations and their perceived negative impact on play, as T3 noted:

I think it just depends on how the staff person was trained and what they believe…. I'm trying to educate people like pulley is their work. It's not like just slough. That's the core of what they need to be doing right now.

T5 also commented on whether the Missouri Learning Standards encourage or discourage the use of play as an educational tool in schools in the following statement:

Just from what I have heard and our collaborations I would say go ahead and discourage it because there's not one standard in there that talks about social skills at all. I know there's a listening and speaking standards and the ELA component, but I think it's more like is the student listening to a teacher when given a direction, can they follow a brief set direction, that kind of thing. I could be wrong but I don't think there's any peer to peer play type anything.

A2 shared with the researcher that she felt the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations both encouraged and discouraged using play as an educational tool in the classroom. Her thoughts were as follows:

That's a good question. I think it's, I don't want to say both, but I feel like it is. I think that if you read the standards themselves, I think if you just read them for what they are, I believe that they probably discourage play, but also as a district and as educators, it's our job, I feel like, to figure out how to best teach the standards. The standards don't tell us how to teach, they do tell us what to teach, so I think as professionals we have to research and figure out what's best practice in order to get our students to master the standards. Who am I to tell a teacher that play is not a strategy that's going to work to teach a certain standard?
**Research Question 4.**

In regard to Research Question Four, open-ended survey responses aligning with the perceived negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on the use of constructivist learning theory include the following:

Currently in our district there seems to be this invisible line between Early Ed[ucation] and Elementary. Instead of working as a team, as one unit. We pretend the other one does not exist. As though we are each our own entity. I also believe the amount of responsibility one is given is too much which enables this thinking (SP14).

SP7 also mentions a perceived the negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on the use of constructivist learning theory, stating, “We have to set them up for what school will look like when they move on…so no play there will mean no play here.” SP29 supports this perception, lamenting, “Constructivist is hard to balance when Missouri learning standards paper push. The worksheets!” Finally, again, we see a consensus from SP40 as s/he stresses,

They make the expectations more rigorous which does not allow the teacher the adequate time to provide the learning opportunities in a[n] authentic way. Many times we find teachers "teaching to the test" because this is "what the children need to know" instead of letting the children play, explore, and construct their own knowledge.

The researcher did consider a few outlier responses that suggested the Missouri Learning Standards do allow for use of constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms, as observed in the following survey responses:

- Constructivist learning theory is when people use their own experiences of the world and reflection in order to gain knowledge. It is up to the teacher to find ways to allow for this type of learning because children will not only gain knowledge but they will apply and evaluate what they are learning (SP17).

- It all depends on how the teacher approaches teaching the standards (SP26).
The researcher also considered the very rare survey response that suggested constructivist learning theory should not be used in the early childhood setting, such as in the survey responses below:

- We are not preparing these students to write their name, recognize letters, spell their name, rote count, [and] recognize letters. Early Ed(ucation) should be "Early Learning in preparation for Kindergarten" not daycare.

- I believe the Constructivist theory is dated and the entire Head Start program needs to be updated to align with today's education modules. There needs to be a "middle road" for the two, in order to prepare our young students appropriately in today's world, at the same time allowing for sufficient social and play activities.

Surprisingly, the interviews exhibited a narrower scope of responses in discussing the impact of the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations on the use of constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms.

A2 was an advocate for utilizing constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms, but admitted she receives pushback from teachers on this in the following interview response:

Teachers have said to me, "But what am I going to give up?" Or, "I don't have time to do this." I think I've had to say and advocate, "Look what you're gaining from it," and yes, we're supposed to teach the standards, but I would rather them do this than learn every science or standard to the T or whatnot, because I feel like they're learning more in this capacity than they would be if you just sit there and have them watch a video or a lecture. They're going to learn far more meaningful content, information, whatever you want to say, when it's on something of their interest and they're in charge of their own learning. Time I think, and the belief that it's okay to give up ... That you're not giving something up, I should say, you're not giving up teaching math time or you're not giving up teaching them science and social studies. You need to integrate these types of project-based learning in what you're already teaching.

Similarly, T5 sees the value in utilizing constructivist learning theory in the early childhood classroom setting, but struggles to fit in this type of learning according to the interview response she gave:
I'm going to say I wish that it could, but I'm going to really say no because there's just no room for that extra stuff. We go from plan life cycles to parts of a plant to animal basic needs to citizenship. Every single week of our year is planned out based on these standards. Basically, we're given our lesson plans and then our choice at how we're going to execute those lesson plans. I guess we're just given our lesson plans, we're given our weekly standards on a mason calendar and then it's our choice how to execute the standards. I make my own lesson plans but I really don't see how it could happen. I've been forced to start an after school club just to do fun science projects, not forced but I chose to do it. That's a whole other story.

Themes

Through analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data collected throughout this research study, the following key themes emerged:

1) Play is learning.

2) There are perceived barriers to using play as an educational tool.

3) The Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations somewhat discourage play.

In entwining these themes, a comprehensive picture is formed as to early childhood stakeholder perceptions regarding the role of play as an educational tool in times of rigor and high accountability. These connections will be further detailed in Chapter Five.

Summary

The study design, data collection methods, conceptual framework, research questions, and process of data analysis have been discussed in Chapter Four. Additionally, a description of each school setting and a brief profile of the eight interview participants were presented. Also within this chapter, the researcher cultivated themes that emerged during data analysis. Discussed in Chapter Five are the findings and conclusions based on the data analysis. Furthermore, presented in Chapter Five are the implications for practice and recommendations for future study.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this concurrent mixed methods study was to explore adult perspectives concerning the role of play in a child’s education through the utilization of qualitative interviews and surveys, which included a Likert scale as well as open-ended questions. The overarching research question for this inquiry was: What is the perceived role of play as an educational tool? Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored participants to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play and the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education. Addressed in this chapter are the summary of the research, recommendations, and conclusions, more specifically including the following: a summary of findings; conclusions derived from themes; limitations; implications for practice; recommendations for future study; and a concluding overview.

Summary of Findings

The following research questions were addressed within the context of this study:

1. What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?

2. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?

3. How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and
Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?

4. How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?

The data collected and analyzed were synthesized and amalgamated with the review of existing literature regarding this research topic as a means of addressing each research question.

**Play is Learning.**

Research Question One asks, “What are perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?” In answering the first research question, it is helpful returning to the first theme that became prevalent throughout the research data: play *is* learning. In the online survey, respondents had to rate to what degree they agreed or disagreed that play has an educational role in the classroom on a 1 to 6 point Likert scale. The results were that 83.52% of respondents (76 out of 92) “Strongly Agreed” (1) that play does have an educational role in the classroom (see Table 1). Survey respondents were also asked to rate on the same 1 to 6 point scale to what degree they believe play serves multiple functions vital in a child’s education and development. The results mirrored the previous survey prompt, with 83.52% of respondents (76 out of 92) selecting “Strongly Agree” (1) that play does serve multiple functions in a child’s education and development (see Table 1).
Qualitative data echoed the quantitative data results. Responses such as, “Children learn through play. When they play, they are discovering, problem solving, building relationships, and gaining knowledge from others” (SP2), and, “They discover and learn new things, even with a toy they have played with before. They can learn math, physical and cognitive skills” (SP1), confirmed the belief that play is a form of learning. Still, other survey participants conveyed a message of play holding a major role in a child’s learning, as seen in this response, “Play promotes communication, language development, social development, imagination, problem solving skills, fine and gross motor skills, adaptive skills, cognitive skills, empathy, compassion and so much more!” (SP58), as well as this response from SP13,

   Skill development, social development, and creativity. Play is the crucible in which imagination and creativity can be cultivated and expressed. Play with other children is critical for the development of social skills. Learning occurs in all areas of development as young children play.

Interview participants were also asked to explain their view of play. Though responses varied, impressively, the perception that play is learning was shared among all interviewees. T2 agreed that play has a large role in the learning process, as she stated in the interview:

   I think play is very important. I think that's how the number one way that children learn. I mean they have the hands on experience. That is a child's work. Just through the opportunities and experiences that we provide them, they learn at their level. They learn through their interests. They learn through handling, through problem solving, and I think it's very valuable.

In analyzing all of the data relating to the first overarching research question, it was clear there is an overwhelming perception that elements of learning occur through a child’s play. Survey respondents and interview participants alike made reference to exploration and discovery at the child’s own pace. Social skills such as turn-taking,
sharing, cooperation, negotiation, and problem-solving were the most prevalent type of learning through play mentioned, though academic learning and physical aspects of learning were also trending throughout the data collected. This aligns with Conyers and Wilson (2015) as they stressed, “Learning is not just a cognitive function. Thinking, feeling, and physicality all come together to develop new knowledge and skills” (p. 38). Active engagement allows learners to practice and extend upon current abilities in order to shift from emerging skills to becoming proficient or even advanced in those skills (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, and McLean, 2001; Ethridge & Branscomb, 2009; Lisko & O’Dell, 2010; Vellutino, Scanlon, Sipay, Small, Pratt, Chen, & Denckla, 1996).

**Perceived Barriers.**

Research Question Two wonders, “What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?” In examining the data collected throughout this study pertaining to Research Question Two, the perception that there are perceived barriers to using play as an educational tool quickly became apparent. Notable subthemes that surfaced include: a) state standards, assessments, and data, b) administrative expectations, and c) misconceptions about play.

**State Standards, Assessments, and Data.** According to the literature review completed as a part of this study, as educational stakeholders try to address the added stress and pressures that accompany increased rigor and accountability measures, play has lost rank as a priority within early childhood settings (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Elkind, 2007). This statement somewhat coincides with this study’s data findings. Again
using a 1 to 6 point Likert rating scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” (1) to “Strongly Disagree” (6), survey participants were asked to rate the degree to which they believe that increases in rigor and accountability have resulted in the inability for play to function as an educational tool. Interestingly, the median survey participant response at 52.75% (48 out of 92) was “Strongly Disagree” (6) (see Table 2). In continuing an examination of Table 2, the next highest percentage was “Disagree” (5) at 16.48% (15 out of 92). In contrast, the following survey prompt stated that the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations do not allow for play in the classroom. The median response at 32.97% (30 out of 92) was that survey participants “Somewhat Agreed” with this statement (see Table 3).

Several open-ended survey responses regarding barriers that prevent play from being used as an educational tool repeatedly referenced the state standards, assessments, and data as a barrier, as seen in responses such as that from SP22, “Time constraints is a big role as to why play is reduced. Another is data, assessment, and expectations from multiple entities with rules and guidelines that vary.” Another, albeit lengthier, survey response from SP34 makes it clear that s/he also feels the pressure from state standards, assessments, and data, as s/he stresses,

When we focus on very specific learning outcomes and place importance on rigid assessments and their scores, we place educators in a situation where they begin teaching with the test in mind, rather than teaching with learning in mind. We also remove from children the opportunity to learn according to their interest. Children are naturally curious, but their interests may not align with the goals of the assessment. When we force children to follow our educational goals, we strip them of autonomy and ownership of their education. When teachers are focused on a set of strict expectations and objectives, the educational focus is narrow. We know, based on research, that when we provide children the opportunity to explore in a variety of ways and areas, more neural connections are created and the neural connections that result are much stronger. Narrowing the focus results
in fewer and weaker neural connections, as well as stifling their natural curiosity and joy in learning.

Interview participants also discussed barriers to utilizing play as an educational tool, including comments about the state standards and assessments among other barriers. In fact, several research participants expressed a sadness with the current state of early childhood education. For example, when asked if she believed there were any barriers preventing the use of play as an educational tool, T5 responded:

...our new teacher evaluation system has 32 points to it and we have to set teacher goals and curriculum goals and if you don't meet those goals then that goes against you on your observation which stays in your permanent HR file. A lot of people, they're so worried about student growth and their data scores that there's really not a lot of time for that fun socio-dramatic, like I said any kind of incorporation anymore. Used to be an observation was, "I want to walk in your classroom and see students being engaged and students maybe doing a cooperative learning activity or the student matter, making it a really creative lesson plan," and now I don't feel like it's any of that. I feel like now it's all based on student data and growth, which is really sad, especially since my own two kiddo's are going through this new system.

A3 also shared her concerns about data and assessments among other things that might prevent the use of play as an educational tool in early childhood classrooms. She was quick to respond with the following:

Absolutely. There is a huge emphasis on data and there's a huge emphasis on assessment which is where we get our data from. In my personal opinion, it's too large because there's always that possibility that the day that you're taking the data is the day that the child witnessed a horrific event in their home or didn't sleep last night or didn't eat that morning and their data's going to be skewed because they're hungry or they're tired or they're scared and so they're not truly showing us what they know or can do. I think that by everything being so data-driven . . . which is understand its purpose. . . . but I think that we're always looking for the scores, we're always looking for the data to support what we're doing. I think that gets in the way big time of play because I'm not certain how you take data on play when a kid is. . . I don't know how you measure creativity. I don't know how you put a number on that.
These data findings further confirm research regarding best practices for our young children. Furthermore, as our economy fluctuates and poverty rates increase, meanwhile more and more homes become single-parent households, our children are experiencing a whole new level of trauma at an early age. Combining this with research such as that of Bailey (2001), Bruner (1996), and Piaget (1929), we as a society must remember that the use of play and other developmentally appropriate strategies in schools positively influence our educational system and the learning processes of children as recognized in the research. Thus, understanding how high stakes accountability is impacting the use of such an educational tool is important. Furthermore, children who are taught utilizing developmentally inappropriate methods are far less likely to achieve school readiness and overall educational success (Rivera, 2009; Scandura & Scandura, 1980; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962). In contrast, if we utilize methods that are developmentally appropriate, we nurture the whole child by allowing him/her to self-teach (Piaget, 1929; Vygotsky, 1962); solve problems (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1929; Scandura & Scandura, 1980); express themselves in a healthy manner (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962); and provide insight into his/her home life and prior experiences (Bailey, 2001; Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005).

Administrative Expectations. Administrative expectations also surfaced as a perceived barrier repeatedly throughout both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This is evidenced in the following online survey responses such as that from SP53 as s/he stated, “Upper administration. One year they came in and simply took all of the toys out of the kindergarten classroom.” SP64 also suggested that administration acted as a barrier to the use of play in the classroom in noting, “Decision making
happening further and further from the classroom - top down.” Finally, SP46 explains, “The greatest barrier is when administrators do not see the importance of play as an educational tool. Teachers are afraid to allow play because it may cause them to have poor evaluations.” Over and over again, the data collected and analyzed through open-ended survey questions stressed that administrative expectations are an ongoing perceived barrier to utilizing play as an educational tool within the early childhood classroom.

Similarly, interview participants echoed much of the concerns about administrative expectations acting as a barrier to using play in the classroom, as can be seen in A2’s response:

I'm a strong, strong advocate for academic focus, and so I am 100% guilty of pushing my teachers, "Focus more on academics, focus more on academics," and I forget that play piece is so important.

T1 also referred to feeling a “push” from administration in her comments below:

There were [was] some of that push that comes from other directions and they're handed to you and you're trying to figure out how you're going to twist it and fit it to your needs and what you think the kids can use, get best out of it.

As school districts navigate data and how to evidence student growth and success, educational stakeholders seem to feel the pressure of increased testing requirements. Elkind (2007) laments that the additional pressure led to more teacher-directed lecturing and paperwork for students rather than more open-ended, project-oriented lessons and active activities, and, consequently, increased accountability and rigor causes educational stakeholders to lose sight of the value of early childhood programs (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007).
**Misconceptions About Play.** Multiple survey respondents referenced misconceptions about play as an educational tool, suggesting that parents, administrators, and/or even some teachers may not recognize that children learn through play. This was apparent in the following open-ended survey response regarding barriers to using play as an educational tool in the early childhood classroom:

As adults, we may not always see the vital learning that is occurring because we become focused on the specific objectives and how and when those "should" be occurring. When we intervene and impart our version of learning upon the child, we deny them the opportunity to reach that knowledge in an organic and meaningful way (SP34).

Correspondingly, SP41 also addressed the fact that there are adults in our society who do not understand developmentally appropriate practice, as evidenced in his/her following response:

In my understanding of & experience of how children grow and learn PLAY should never be removed from the classroom setting. Barriers are created by those who do not have a true understanding of how children develop. Especially administrators who are looking for a[n] outcome and not working with children on their personal level.

Finally, SP66 also agrees that early childhood stakeholders may not understand how play can equate to learning opportunities in his/her comments below:

Because of the increase in rigor and accountability in education these days, it is difficult for many of those who are not in direct contact on a day to day basis with our children to see the benefits of play. They seem to believe that play is simply an act of 'having fun' and not a way in which our children can learn.

Likewise, interview participants also mentioned adult misconceptions related to the educational role of play. In her interview, A2 specifically mentioned parent misconceptions about play in the following response:

Sometimes I have to step back and make sure that I give the teachers the autonomy to do that [incorporate play], and I think a lot of times the barrier of play, and I know just perceptions of parents in the community, I don't send my
kids to school to play, I send my kids to school to learn. While that's 100% true, it's our job as educators, I think, to teach the parents that yes, in your opinion they're playing, but they're also learning.

T2 was also one study participant of several who noted the misconceptions that parents seem to hold regarding play as an educational tool, as seen below:

I know some parents still question that [play] a lot. I think sometimes teachers shy away from it [play] a little bit, because of how parents opinion. Parents don't quite agree with that. When we say play, we mean work. When they [parents] say play, they're more thinking, well why not work? I think it can be a barrier.

These responses only reiterate the fact that society oftentimes does not comprehend what learning looks like in the early stages of child development, with added pressures stemming from parents, administrators, and other early education stakeholders. Consequently, developmentally appropriate practices are not always reflected in the early childhood classroom setting (Bailey, 2001; Bennett, 2003). As stringent performance expectations filtered down from high school to early childhood, play has become less of an educational tool and more of a luxury to be utilized only after core competencies are addressed first (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Elkind, 2007).

Figure 3 below synopsizes the concerns voiced by participants and how stakeholder perceptions regarding barriers impact play as a priority in the early childhood classroom.
Based upon survey and interview responses, the perception of what is occurring in the field of early childhood is that state standards, assessment, and data have become top priority as they form the foundation of early childhood programs. Figure 3 depicts the perception that the Missouri Learning Standards [MLS], assessments, and data are highly prioritized within our educational system, even at the early childhood level. In conjunction with this, early childhood stakeholders (teachers and administrators) perceive that there are administrative expectations as well as misconceptions about the use play as an educational tool that further impact the use of play within the early childhood
classroom setting. Because of this, play ultimately becomes the lowest priority and is viewed as optional. Interestingly enough, every participant in this study listed at least one skill that is learned through play, with most responses listing several concepts learned best through play opportunities. Sadly, based on perceived barriers and the major impact of state standards, assessment, and data, play quickly becomes the last priority despite the fact that stakeholders recognize its value in the early childhood setting. This becomes further evident in the following subsection.

**State Standards and Kindergarten Expectations Discourage Play.**

In Research Question Three, we ask, “How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?” The additional pressures and stress of proving the academic worth of a student, school, or district resulted in large part from NCLB (NCLB, 2001) and ESSA (EOP, 2015) as well as CCSS (NGA, 2010) and MLS (DESE, 2016). More and more children are denied opportunities for developmentally appropriate activities, such as play, as early childhood teachers and administrators struggle to keep up with increased rigor and accountability measures (Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Brown, 2010; Madsen, Schroeder, & Irby, 2014; Pink, 2005).

According to the data collected, there is an overall perception among early childhood stakeholders that the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations somewhat discourage play. In a survey prompt stating, “The Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations do not allow for play in the classroom”, the median response rating at 32.97% (30 out of 92) was
“Somewhat Agree” (see Table 3). Open-ended survey responses that aligned with the perceived negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on play in the classroom include those such as:

These standards push children beyond what they are developmentally capable impacting competence and confidence. Politicians are forcing implementation of expectations that children are not ready for. Competence is gained through self-initiated play, exploration, and teacher guided practice. Seat work as forced by implementation of standards based curriculum is not allowing natural development to occur in our children. Politicians need to do a little early childhood research. I think they might have some "light bulb" moments (SP43).

Many survey respondents, but not all, agreed with this sentiment that state standards and grade school student performance expectations are pushing down into the early childhood field. SP17 states, “As kindergarten becomes more rigorous, so do the expectations of preschool. Because of the developmental differences between preschool and kindergarten children, preschool programs attempt to bridge the gap.” Similarly, SP88 proposes,

So much has to be taught. Many do not believe there is time for play. Newer teachers have been taught differently in college than older teachers. The pendulum is swinging back towards more play. Children are experiencing stress and have more behavioral problems because they are not allowed to move and explore their surrounding[s]. Preschools are what kindergarten used to be. Kindergarten is what first grade used to be.

With this said, there may be a light at the end of the tunnel according to SP88’s response. S/he notes that s/he feels that the pendulum is swinging back towards play. Interestingly enough, the interview participant responses were more broadly dispersed as to the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations and their perceived negative impact on play, as T3 noted:

I think it just depends on how the staff person was trained and what they believe…. I'm trying to educate people like pulley is their work. It's not like just slough. That's the core of what they need to be doing right now.
T5 also commented on whether the Missouri Learning Standards encourage or discourage the use of play as an educational tool in schools in the following statement:

Just from what I have heard and our collaborations I would say go ahead and discourage it because there's not one standard in there that talks about social skills at all. I know there's a listening and speaking standards and the ELA component, but I think it's more like is the student listening to a teacher when given a direction, can they follow a brief set direction, that kind of thing. I could be wrong but I don't think there's any peer to peer play type anything.

A2 shared with the researcher that she felt the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations both encouraged and discouraged using play as an educational tool in the classroom. Her thoughts were as follows:

That's a good question. I think it's, I don't want to say both, but I feel like it is. I think that if you read the standards themselves, I think if you just read them for what they are, I believe that they probably discourage play, but also as a district and as educators, it's our job, I feel like, to figure out how to best teach the standards. The standards don't tell us how to teach, they do tell us what to teach, so I think as professionals we have to research and figure out what's best practice in order to get our students to master the standards. Who am I to tell a teacher that play is not a strategy that's going to work to teach a certain standard?

In analyzing online survey responses in tandem with interview responses, “Somewhat Agree” seems to summarize participants’ thoughts well in regards to this particular topic.

Research Question Four asks, “How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?” Returning again to the literature review completed for this study, with the additional challenges and pressures that accompany increased rigor and accountability measures (Madsen, Schroeder, & Irby, 2014; Pink, 2005), play has taken a backseat as an educational tool (Bailey, 2011; Gagnon, Reichard, Kidder-Ashley, Griggs, Struby, & Bollinger, 2014). According to Elkind (2007), even “parents, anxious for their children to succeed in an
increasingly competitive global economy, regard play as a luxury that the contemporary child cannot afford” (p. ix). Data collected somewhat suggests the perception that Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have a negative impact on the use of constructivist learning theory within the early childhood classroom. The median survey response rating at 30.77% (28 out of 92 responses) was “Somewhat Agree” (see Table 4). It is noteworthy to mention that the second highest response was “Agree” at 21.98% (20 out of 92 responses) and the third highest response at 15.38 % (14 out of 92 responses) was “Strongly Agree.” Of the research questions posed, Research Question 4 exhibited the broadest findings in that there was a greater variance among stakeholder perceptions across the rating categories. With this said, the “Agree” side of the rating scale outweighed the “Disagree” survey responses.

Open-ended survey responses that aligned with the perceived negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on the use of constructivist learning theory include the following:

Currently in our district there seems to be this invisible line between Early Ed[ucation] and Elementary. Instead of working as a team, as one unit. We pretend the other one does not exist. As though we are each our own entity. I also believe the amount of responsibility one is given is too much which enables this thinking (SP14).

SP7 also mentions a perceived the negative impact the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations have on the use of constructivist learning theory, stating, “We have to set them up for what school will look like when they move on…so no play there will mean no play here.” SP29 supports this perception, lamenting, “Constructivist is hard to balance when Missouri learning standards paper push. The worksheets!” Finally, again, we see a consensus from SP40 as s/he stresses,
They make the expectations more rigorous which does not allow the teacher the adequate time to provide the learning opportunities in an authentic way. Many times we find teachers "teaching to the test" because this is "what the children need to know" instead of letting the children play, explore, and construct their own knowledge.

The researcher did consider a few outlier responses that suggested the Missouri Learning Standards do allow for use of constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms, as observed in the following survey responses:

- Constructivist learning theory is when people use their own experiences of the world and reflection in order to gain knowledge. It is up to the teacher to find ways to allow for this type of learning because children will not only gain knowledge but they will apply and evaluate what they are learning (SP17).

- It all depends on how the teacher approaches teaching the standards (SP26).

The researcher also considered the very rare survey response that suggested constructivist learning theory should not be used in the early childhood setting, such as in the survey responses below:

- We are not preparing these students to write their name, recognize letters, spell their name, rote count, [and] recognize letters. Early Ed[ucation] should be "Early Learning in preparation for Kindergarten" not daycare.

- I believe the Constructivist theory is dated and the entire Head Start program needs to be updated to align with today's education modules. There needs to be a "middle road" for the two, in order to prepare our young students appropriately in today's world, at the same time allowing for sufficient social and play activities.

Surprisingly, the interviews exhibited a more narrow scope of responses in discussing the impact of the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations on the use of constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms. A2 was an advocate for utilizing constructivist learning theory in early childhood classrooms, but admitted she receives pushback from teachers on this in the following interview response:
Teachers have said to me, "But what am I going to give up?" Or, "I don't have time to do this." I think I've had to say and advocate, "Look what you're gaining from it," and yes, we're supposed to teach the standards, but I would rather them do this than learn every science or standard to the T or whatnot, because I feel like they're learning more in this capacity than they would be if you just sit there and have them watch a video or a lecture. They're going to learn far more meaningful content, information, whatever you want to say, when it's on something of their interest and they're in charge of their own learning. Time I think, and the belief that it's okay to give up ... That you're not giving something up, I should say, you're not giving up teaching math time or you're not giving up teaching them science and social studies. You need to integrate these types of project-based learning in what you're already teaching.

Similarly, T5 sees the value in utilizing constructivist learning theory in the early childhood classroom setting, but struggles to fit in this type of learning according to the interview response she gave:

I'm going to say I wish that it could, but I'm going to really say no because there's just no room for that extra stuff. We go from plan life cycles to parts of a plant to animal basic needs to citizenship. Every single week of our year is planned out based on these standards. Basically, we're given our lesson plans and then our choice at how are we going to execute those lesson plans. I guess we're just given our lesson plans, we're given our weekly standards on a mason calendar and then it's our choice how to execute the standards. I make my own lesson plans but I really don't see how it could happen. I've been forced to start an after school club just to do fun science projects, not forced but I chose to do it. That's a whole other story.

Through analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data sets, “Somewhat Agree” provides an accurate picture of the overall responses received regarding the Missouri Learning Standards and kindergarten through third grade expectations and whether they negatively impact the use of constructivist learning theory within the early childhood classroom. Early childhood stakeholders seem to recognize the value and importance of incorporating play into early childhood classrooms despite recent increases in rigor and accountability measures.
This research study’s data results align fairly closely with research from experts such as Epstein (2014), who stresses, “When teachers expect children to learn, they do” (p. 6). The classroom is a valuable place to learn (Curtis & Carter, 2003) with teachers making meaningful connections to prior knowledge, individualizing lessons and activities to complement children’s developmental levels (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Furthermore, thoughtful questioning provides insight into student perspectives and thought processes and stimulates higher-order thinking skills (Bailey, 2001; Chaille, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), which are necessary components in becoming school ready. It is sad, as numerous study participants suggested, that many children today are not in early childhood environments that consistently prioritize developmentally appropriate practice.

**Conclusions**

The overarching research question for this inquiry was: What is the perceived role of play as an educational tool? Ultimately, in exploring stakeholder perceptions of play utilizing the lens of Piaget’s (1929) constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1996; Schweinhart, 2005), this study implored participants to reflect upon their beliefs regarding play and the application of developmentally appropriate strategies in early childhood education. In analyzing the data collected in relation to Research Question One, it was suggested all research participants believed that play is learning in one form or another. A majority of the responses referred to social-emotional skills that emerge from play opportunities, while there were a sizeable handful of responses that referred to more cognitive/academic skills. It can be concluded that educators see the value of play in early childhood programs.
Despite the fact that all study participants see the value of play as an educational tool, a majority of participants discussed perceived barriers to the use of play as an educational tool within the early childhood classroom setting, which was associated with Research Question Two. Barriers referred to most often included state standards, assessments, and data as well as administrator expectations and misconceptions about play. Unfortunately, the bulk of participants suggested that these perceived barriers reduce, or in some cases eliminate, the use of play as an educational tool in early childhood classrooms. Thus it can be concluded, that while educators see the value of play, there are numerous barriers that allow play to be used as an educational tool.

Research Questions Three and Four related to the Missouri Learning Standards [MLS] and kindergarten through third grade expectations. Research Question Three asked whether there was a perception among early childhood stakeholders that the MLS and kindergarten through third grade expectations impacted the role of play in early childhood education. The highest response percentage was that of “Somewhat Agree”, though the next highest rating was “Agree” followed closely by “Strongly Agree.” Though survey and interview responses painted a fainter picture for this question, the qualitative responses suggested the conclusion that participants did indeed somewhat agree that the MLS and kindergarten through third grade expectations negatively impacted the role of play in early childhood classroom settings.

Research Question Four continued the discussion surrounding early childhood stakeholder perceptions surrounding MLS and kindergarten through third grade expectations in asking whether they negatively impacted the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms. Again, responses were broader among the
different ratings, though the highest respondent rating was “Somewhat Agree.” Many of the qualitative responses supported this perception, though there were a few outliers who suggested that the teachers and administration have more control regarding the learning path than they were willing to accept. There were also a small number of responses that surmised the constructivist learning theory is outdated and does not address concepts the children will be required to master in kindergarten based on current standards.

The majority of these early childhood teachers and administrators acknowledged the fact that play can be a beneficial educational tool within the early childhood setting, despite times of rigor and high accountability. As mentioned, there was a handful of respondents who suggested that, while the standards designate the expected outcomes, teachers and administrators willing to take the time to think outside of the instructional box will still find ways to incorporate elements of play into the daily routine as a means of learning. Play has much to offer in the early childhood learning environment, and as research continues to mount in support of the use of play as an educational tool, hopefully society as a whole will begin to better recognize its instructional potential.

Limitations

All studies have limitations (Heppner & Heppner, 2004), and there are several limitations and assumptions in regard to this investigation; however, the researcher took steps to minimize these limitations in order to diminish their impact on the findings of this study. These limitations were acknowledged in an attempt to inform the reader and provide a framework for understanding the results of the investigation. The limitations for this study include the following:
1. There was a geographical limitation for the study as the participating school districts are located only in the state of Missouri.

2. Schools participating in the study were required to have early childhood programs and, therefore, the information collected in this study may be generalized to only the limited number of schools that have early childhood programs in them.

3. The findings of the survey instruments used are limited to the sample group responding and the researcher was aware that broad application of the findings may be biased.

4. The study was conducted near the end of one academic school year calendar and the beginning of the following academic school year calendar to collect and analyze results.

5. When using surveys, differences in how individuals respond and the biases of the researcher can interfere with the validity in the research.

6. Due to scheduling conflicts, travel requirements, and timing of the interviews, some interviews were conducted off-site rather than in the interviewee’s school setting.

Steps were taken to minimize the effects of these limitations through supervision and guidance from experienced researchers throughout this study. In choosing the sample population for the study, various sampling techniques were used to produce a representative sample to increase the generalization of the results (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). To better ensure a high participation rate in the study, the researcher sent several requests and reminders over the course of several months.
Implications for Practice

Legislative changes and expectations regarding school readiness have greatly impacted what play looks like and how it is perceived. Several educational reform initiatives impacting early childhood continue to gain momentum and add pressures in the form of state standards, assessment, and data expectations. Though early childhood interventions also continue to gain support and growing research supports the impact of early interventions on a child’s overall educational success (Rivera, 2009; Schweinhart, 2005), there are many obstacles that prevent these early interventions from occurring.

Not only is funding limited in the early childhood field at the federal, state, and local levels, but Presidential endorsement of early childhood combined with policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] (EOP, 2015) as well as educational initiatives like Common Core State Standards [CCSS] (NGA, 2009) and Missouri Learning Standards [MLS] (DESE, 2016) have significantly influenced current practices. Educational reform, though seemingly developed with the best intentions, has created unfavorable educational conditions across the nation due to inconsistent implementation procedures (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007; Superfine, 2005). Though this study focused solely on school districts in the state of Missouri, this trend was recognizable. In addition, society—including educational stakeholders—rarely comprehends what learning looks like at this early stage of child development. Consequently, developmentally appropriate practices are not always reflected in the early childhood setting (Bailey, 2001; Bennett, 2003). Again, this research study’s findings came to a similar conclusion. As practitioners who acknowledge that play is in fact learning, this researcher stresses the
need to better advocate for developmentally appropriate practice, which, in the field of early childhood, includes the application of a constructivist learning approach and the incorporation of play into learning objectives.

CCSS and MLS were developed to lend clarity and consistency to learning expectations for students (NGA, 2010; DESE, 2016), however these standards actually resulted in more confusion and ambiguity. As school districts navigated data and how to evidence student growth and success, educational stakeholders felt the pressure of increased testing requirements. This was also observed in this research study’s findings. The additional pressure has led to more teacher-directed lecturing and paperwork for students rather than more open-ended, project-oriented lessons and active activities (Elkind, 2007), consequently, increased accountability and rigor has caused educational stakeholders to lose sight of the value of early childhood programs (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007).

Figure 3, which was based on data collected and analyzed throughout the course of this study, reinforced these ideas. It is recommended by this researcher that our society prioritize play as an educational tool for its young children so that learning outcomes are achieved through best practice. Though data requirements will not be diminishing, state and school district stakeholders need to examine what data can be collected based on developmentally appropriate practices and, in conjunction with this, decipher how to translate that data in to improved early childhood instructional approaches and strategies. In addition, there is an educational opportunity to better inform early education stakeholders such as parents, administrators, policy-makers, and others as to the educational benefits of play and how play-based learning can lead to
school readiness and academic achievement. Finally, policy-makers need to consider the incorporation of play-based learning standards so that our overarching educational goals and expectations are developmentally appropriate for our young children.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

While the findings of this study echoed and expanded upon much of the literature available on the subject of early childhood interventions, further research is needed. Replication of this study may be applied to different educational roles within the field of early childhood education in order to compare perceptions based on role. Another option would be to replicate this study with identical questions but use parent/guardian participants in order to see how their perceptions compare to those of early childhood teachers and administrators. Replication of this study may also be applied to different school districts either within the state of Missouri, across the United States, or as a comparison among different countries could provide insights on commonalities across early childhood programs. It could also be interesting to compare the assessment data of kindergartners coming from early childhood programs utilizing a constructivist approach and incorporating play versus data of kindergartners who came from more rigid early childhood programs that do not use these types of approaches.

Other questions to consider include: How do the perceptions of play for stakeholders from different early childhood roles compare? How do the perceptions of play for parents/guardians compare to those of early childhood teachers and administrators? How do the perceptions of play for stakeholders from school districts in Missouri compare to those of other states? How do American perceptions of play compare to that of other countries? How do parents’ perceptions of play compare to
perceptions of play from early childhood stakeholders currently working in the field? These questions surrounding perceptions about the role of play in education in times of rigor and high accountability reach beyond the focus of this study but should be considered.

**Concluding Overview**

This concurrent triangulation mixed methods study (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010) explored adult stakeholder perceptions concerning the role of play as an educational tool in times of high rigor and accountability. Collected data for this study was examined using inductive analysis as common themes emerged. Returning to the initiation of this research study, the following two scenarios were offered: one five-year-old child is on the *school readiness* track completing work in workbooks and practicing proper letter formation as a part of his/her evening ritual. Meanwhile, another five-year-old child is playing with his/her parents on the floor, conversing about the multi-colored cars they are driving and counting who has the most cars in their pile. This question was posed: “Which child is learning more?”

In light of the data collected and analyzed throughout the course of this research study, perhaps we were asking the wrong question. Is it a matter of one child learning more than the other, or whether one approach is more developmentally appropriate than the other? All participants in this study alluded to the fact that play is learning in one form or another. Response trends also included the importance of developing social-emotional skills as well as working with the “whole child” rather than solely focusing on academics.
Based on this study’s findings, the perception is that both children in the scenarios are learning, but due to state standards, assessments, and data expectations in conjunction with administrative expectations and misconceptions about play as a learning tool, there is a strong possibility that the second child would not receive such a learning opportunity in today’s early childhood classroom setting. Through play and other appropriate activities, children should be encouraged to take risks and try new things, making connections to previous learning and experiences, whether academic or personal (Epstein, 2009, 2014). Bailey (2001, 2011) contends that ideas should be valued and relationships should be strong, while Curtis and Carter (2003) emphasized if care and time are taken to develop this type of learning environment, then play becomes a powerful, rigorous educational tool (Weisberg, et al., 2015). To this end, we as a society are missing prime opportunities to better develop well-rounded children who not only comprehend challenging academic concepts, but who also have healthy self-concepts and relationships.
References


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Your Exempt Application to project entitled Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number 2002817
IRB Review Number 205593
Initial Application Approval Date May 13, 2016
IRB Expiration Date May 13, 2017
Level of Review Exempt
Project Status Active - Open to Enrollment
Exempt Categories 45 CFR 46.101b(2)
Risk Level Minimal Risk

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated problems, adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 days.
3. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce immediate risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date. If the study is complete, the Completion/Withdrawal Form may be submitted in lieu of the Annual Exempt Form
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize all approved research documents located within the attached files section of eCompliance. These documents are highlighted green.
If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the MU Business Policy and Procedure:
http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_250.html

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB at 573-882-3181 or irb@missouri.edu.

Thank you,
MU Institutional Review Board
Appendix B

1. District Gatekeeper Permission for Educator Participation
2. District Point Person Recruitment Script
3. Informed Consent—Interview Participant
4. Informed Consent—Survey Participant
District Gatekeeper Permission for Educator Participation Letter

< Name of District>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>

I would like to request your permission to invite applicable educators in your school district to participate in a research study entitled: *Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability*. I am examining the perceptions of early childhood educators and administrators regarding the role of play in education today. The information gathered should be beneficial to early childhood stakeholders as well as to school leaders. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

For the study, a sampling was selected of early childhood educators and administrators across the state of Missouri. I am seeking your permission as an administrator of the <Name of District> School District to contact the principals and applicable faculty of one school building for the purpose of inviting educators who fit the criteria to participate in this study. One or two early childhood staff from your district will then be chosen by the principal for an on-site observation lasting approximately one hour and an individual interview session lasting one hour to 90 minutes. All remaining building staff will be asked to complete a 20 to 30 minute online survey regarding the topic of this research study. A copy of the interview and survey protocol as well as informed consent forms are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from participation at any time they wish without penalty, including in the middle of or after completion of the interview. Participants’ answers and the building's identity will remain confidential, anonymous, and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in his dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 269-0732 or by electronic mail at pmg9f8@mail.missouri.edu. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at (816) 830-3904 or by email at bmartin@ucmo.edu.

If you choose to allow me to contact educators in your district regarding participation in this study, please complete the attached permission form. A copy of this letter and your written consent should be retained by you for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Patricia M. White
Doctoral Candidate
District Point Person Recruitment Script

To Whom it May Concern:

Permission was granted by the school district superintendent to include your district in a research study entitled: *Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability*. I would like to request that you participate in this study if you are willing to volunteer. I am examining the perceptions of early childhood educators and administrators regarding the role of play in education today. The information gathered should be beneficial to early childhood stakeholders as well as to school leaders. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

For the study, a sampling was selected of early childhood educators and administrators from school districts across the state of Missouri. I am seeking your consent to participate in this study. Willing early childhood staff and administrators are being asked to complete a 15-20 minute, anonymous online survey regarding the topic of this research study. If you are comfortable participating, please take the survey using the following link: <link>.

For those early childhood staff and administrators willing to volunteer for a one-on-one interview that will be audio-recorded, please contact Patricia White at (816) 269-0732 or by email at pmg9f8@mail.missouri.edu.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. The participants may withdraw from participation at any time they wish without penalty, including in the middle of or after completion of the interview. Participants' answers and the building's identity will remain confidential, anonymous, and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in her dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Information produced by this study will be stored in the investigator’s file and identified by a code number only. The code key connecting your name to specific information about you will be kept in a separate, secure location. Information contained in your records may not be given to anyone unaffiliated with the study in a form that could identify you without your written consent, except as required by law.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 269-0732 or by electronic mail at pmg9f8@mail.missouri.edu. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at (816) 830-3904 or by email at bmartin@ucmo.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants’ rights) at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.
A copy of this information should be retained by you for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Patricia M. White
Doctoral Candidate
University of Missouri-Columbia
CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Researcher’s Name(s): Patricia White
Project Number: 2002817

Project Title: Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study titled Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability. This research is being conducted as a means of examining the perceptions of early childhood educators and administrators regarding the role of play in education today. The information gathered should be beneficial to early childhood stakeholders as well as to school leaders. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participation. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

You have the right to know what you will be asked to do so that you can decide whether or not to be in the study. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. You may refuse to be in the study and nothing will happen. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of early childhood educators and administrators regarding the role of play in education today. As expectations surrounding rigor and accountability increase, what, if any, is the perceived impact on early childhood education? The information gathered should be beneficial to early childhood stakeholders as well as to school leaders.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THE STUDY?

About 200 people will take part in this study from 10 school districts within the state of Missouri.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?

For those early childhood staff and/or administrators willing to volunteer, a one-on-one interview that will be audio-recorded will take place with the Principal Investigator, Patricia White, which will last approximately one hour.
HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

This study will tentatively begin in June and interviews will occur through August. Interviews will take about one hour to complete. You can stop participating at any time without penalty.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

Your participation will benefit early childhood stakeholders in reflecting on current curriculum and practices in order to achieve school readiness while remaining age appropriate.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

There is no cost to you.

WHAT OTHER OPTIONS ARE THERE?

Instead of being in this study, you have the following option:

- You can choose not to participate in this study, and there will be no penalty.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants' answers and the school district and building's identity will remain confidential, anonymous, and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in her dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Information produced by this study will be stored in the investigator’s file and identified by a code number only. The code key connecting your name to specific information about you will be kept in a separate, secure location. Information contained in your records may not be given to anyone unaffiliated with the study in a form that could identify you without your written consent, except as required by law.

In addition, if photographs, audiotapes or videotapes were taken during the study that could identify you, then you must give special written permission for their use. In that case, you will be given the opportunity to view or listen, as applicable, to the photographs, audiotapes or videotapes before you give your permission for their use if you so request.

WILL I BE COMPENSATED FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

You will receive no payment for taking part in this study.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study.
WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Please contact Patricia White, Principal Investigator, or Barbara Martin, Dissertation Advisor, if you have questions about the research. Additionally, you may ask questions, voice concerns or complaints to the research team at any time.

WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants’ rights) at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

You may ask more questions about the study at any time. For questions about the study, contact Patricia White at (816) 269-0732 or by electronic mail at pmg9f8@mail.missouri.edu. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at (816) 830-3904 or by email at bmartin@ucmo.edu.

A copy of this Informed Consent form will be given to you before you participate in the research.
CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Researcher’s Name(s): Patricia White
Project Number: 2002817

Project Title: Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study titled Work hard, play hard: Exploring perceptions of play in times of rigor and high accountability. This research is being conducted as a means of examining the perceptions of early childhood educators and administrators regarding the role of play in education today. The information gathered should be beneficial to early childhood stakeholders as well as to school leaders. This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether or not to consent to participation. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

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HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THE STUDY?

About 200 people will take part in this study from 10 school districts within the state of Missouri.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey that will take approximately 15-20 minutes.
HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

This study will tentatively begin in June 2016 and surveys will occur through August 2016. Surveys will take approximately 15-20 minutes, and you can stop participating at any time without penalty.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

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Appendix C

Survey Protocol (delivered via Survey Monkey)

TARGET: The role of play in education today

INSTRUCTIONS: Patricia White (EdD student at the University of Missouri-Columbia in the Education Leadership and Policy Analysis program) is conducting a survey that has been approved by [your] district for distribution. Your response would be much appreciated. By completing this survey, you are providing your informed consent to participate in research for the purpose of assessing perceptions regarding the value and role of play in times of rigor and high accountability. We are not asking that you identify yourself in taking the survey, and you can withdraw from participation at any time. Also, by completing the survey, you are giving us your informed consent to use your unidentified answers in my analysis and findings of this study. Please take a few moments to complete these [#] questions. Comments are welcome in the space provided. Here is the link to the survey:  https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X5G6NSS . This link is uniquely tied to this survey and was included in an email to [school district administrator]. If you did not receive this email as a forward from [District Point Person], please disregard. After you have completed the survey, please do not forward this message to another individual.

STATEMENTS: Please rate the following questions/statements by selecting one of the following: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree.

QUESTIONS: Please answer the open-ended questions according to your personal beliefs and experiences.

1. I believe play has an educational role in the classroom.
   
   Strongly Disagree—Somewhat Disagree—Disagree—Somewhat Agree—Agree—Strongly Agree

   1b. In what way(s), if any, do you view play as a valuable tool for learning?
   Explain.

2. I believe play serves multiple functions vital in a child’s education and development.

   Strongly Disagree—Somewhat Disagree—Disagree—Somewhat Agree—Agree—Strongly Agree

   2b. What functions, if any, do you feel play serves in a child’s education?
3. With the increase in rigor and accountability, I believe play cannot function as an educational tool at school.  

Strongly Disagree—Somewhat Disagree—Disagree—Somewhat Agree—Agree—Strongly Agree

3b. What barriers, if any, keep play from being used as an educational tool in today’s school setting? Please clarify.

4. The Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations do not allow for play in the classroom.  

Strongly Disagree—Somewhat Disagree—Disagree—Somewhat Agree—Agree—Strongly Agree

4b. How does the implementation of Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play as an educational tool?

4c. What barriers, if any, do the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations present regarding the role of play as an educational tool?

4d. What barriers, if any, do Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations present regarding the role of play as a means of achieving school readiness?

5. The Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations have a negative impact on the use of constructivist learning theory within the early childhood classroom.  

Strongly Disagree—Somewhat Disagree—Disagree—Somewhat Agree—Agree—Strongly Agree

5b. In what way(s), if any, does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of
constructivist learning theory within the early childhood classroom? Explain.

**CLOSING:** Again, thank you for participating in this survey. Your responses will remain anonymous. If you should have any further questions, please feel free to forward them via the email address that accompanied this invitation.
Appendix D

1. Interview Protocol Form
2. Interview Questions
Interview Protocol Form

Date of Interview___________________  Participant Name______________________
Start Time________________________  End Time__________________________
Program/District________________________

Field Notes:
Interview Questions

TARGET:  The role of play in education today

INTERVIEW DISCUSSION:

INTRODUCTION –  
• Good afternoon. I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri-Columbia in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. My dissertation focuses on the role of play as an educational tool in times of rigor and high accountability. The purpose of this interview is to explore your perception of play in today’s educational setting.
• I want to thank you for taking the time to visit with me and share your perspectives. I know you are a very busy individual, and I appreciate your openness to this opportunity. Throughout our time together, I promise to be efficient, take notes and audiotape the conversation to make certain I am capturing your responses correctly.
• Participation in this interview is voluntary. Please know that I understand the importance of confidentiality and will respect your perspectives throughout this experience. Should you have any questions or concerns throughout this interview, please feel free to stop the process and clarify your needs. If at any time you become uncomfortable with the process or wish to remove yourself from it, please let me know. Is this process acceptable to you?
• Again, thank you. Let’s begin the interview . . .

QUESTIONS –

(1) Tell me about yourself.

(2) As an early childhood <position>, what is your role (job title or parent, past or present role, etc...)?

(3) What is your view of play?

(4) What is your view of play as an educational tool?

(5) How would you define school readiness?

(6) Do you believe play can assist in school readiness? Why or why not?

(7) Do you believe there are barriers that prevent the use of play in early childhood classrooms? Please explain.

(8) What are some barriers, if any, to utilizing play in the early childhood classroom as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?

(9) What do you know or have you heard about the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations?
(10) Do the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations encourage or discourage the use of play as an educational tool in schools? Please explain.

(11) What is your philosophy about how students learn?

(12) What is the school’s philosophy about how students learn?

(13) What do you know about constructivist learning theory?

(14) How might constructivist learning theory fit into the early childhood classroom in light of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations?

(15) What are some barriers, if any, to utilizing constructivist learning theory in an early childhood classroom in light of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations?

(16) What methods or measures are used to determine the effectiveness of instruction?

(17) What criteria define student success in your program?

CLOSING –

• In closing . . . is there anything further you would like to add that I might not have inquired about?

• Again, thank you so much for your time today and the valuable insights you have shared. I sincerely appreciate your commitment to learning and to assisting me in my doctoral studies.

DURING THE INTERVIEW, NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

• Were the participants comfortable answering the questions?

• Did the participants appear knowledgeable about the subject?

• Describe the communication used during these interactions.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE:

• Write the researcher’s reactions to the interactions observed.

FOLLOW UP WITH A THANK YOU CARD WITHIN 24 HOURS . . .
Appendix E

Question Key

Q1- Questions related to Research Question 1 (noted in blue)
Q2- Questions related to Research Question 2 (noted in red)
Q3- Questions related to Research Question 3 (noted in purple)
Q4- Questions related to Research Question 4 (noted in green)

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the role of play in a child’s education?

2. What are the perceptions of early childhood administrators and early childhood teachers regarding the perceived barriers, if any, to utilizing play as an educational tool in order to achieve school readiness?

3. How does implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the role of play in early childhood education as perceived by early childhood stakeholders?

4. How does the implementation of the Missouri Learning Standards and Kindergarten through third grade expectations impact the use of constructivist learning theory within early childhood classrooms?
# Appendix F

## Data Codes

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</tr>
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<td>Survey Participants 1-92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

Patricia White was born in St. Louis, Missouri to John and Becki Gray. She graduated in 2000 from Jackson High School in Jackson, Missouri. In 2005, she received Bachelor of Science degrees in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education from the University of Missouri – Columbia. She later earned a Master of Education in Administration from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2011 followed by a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2016.

Patricia’s work experiences consist of a variety of roles. She began her career as an early childhood teacher’s assistant in the Columbia Public School District in Missouri. She was promoted to a teaching position in a Title I early childhood classroom where she remained for five years. Upon moving to Kansas City, Missouri, Patricia worked as the Assistant Director of Early Education for one year for the Independence School District. She then transitioned to a Principal position in an early childhood building within the school district and is currently in her third year there. She also serves as the administrator for the district’s Head Start and Early Head Start program. Research interests include early childhood education and state standards and assessments and how they impact one another.

Dr. White currently resides in Independence, Missouri, with her husband, Cole White, and their daughter, Bailey.