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## Exploring Preschool Educators' Funds of Knowledge about Print Literacy Pedagogy through a Narrative Lens

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree in Education

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EXPLORING PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS' *FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE* ABOUT  
PRINT LITERACY PEDAGOGY THROUGH A NARRATIVE LENS

(Thesis Format: Monograph)

by

Nazila Eisazadeh

Faculty of Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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London, Ontario, Canada

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## **Abstract**

This thesis reports on a narrative case study in which I explored early childhood educators' (ECEs) beliefs about print literacy and play pedagogies. The purpose of the study was to learn about the ECEs' subjective views regarding how to support young children's print literacy; the extent to which ECEs viewed play as a contributing factor in children's print literacy development; and how ECEs appropriated their understandings of the relationship between play and print literacy. I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with six registered early childhood educators (RECEs) employed in privately funded childcare centres in Ontario, Canada. I asked: What can be learned about preschool educators' *funds of knowledge* from stories of practice about print literacy pedagogies? What beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy are expressed in those stories? What obstacles to enacting play-based pedagogies are expressed? What do stories of practice reveal about the ways in which they value play? And lastly, what do stories reveal about the ways in which beliefs about play mediate planning of curricular experiences? Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed in a two-stage process. First I identified key issues present in each participant's stories of practice. I then triangulated the three data sources- interpretive stories, participants' personal narratives, and my own reflective diaries- in order to further explore these issues using critical analysis. These issues came in the form of motifs or recurring ideas. The study found that ECEs mobilized their knowledge about play and print literacy development within routine practices. Perceived obstacles to play-based pedagogies included: (1) a desire to please students' parents; (2) an obligation to prepare students for public school; and (3) pressures to conform to the institutional routines that governed

individuals' practices. This study contributed to my understandings of ECE practices. I hope the findings will promote critical dialogue among educators and other education stakeholders. Such a dialogue can lead to improvements in professional development programs and in ECEs' pedagogical practices with print literacy and play.

#### Keywords

Early childhood educators, school readiness, print literacy, play, narrative, case study

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my sister, Nazanin Eisazadeh who has always challenged my thinking and inspired me to pursue higher education. This thesis is also in memoriam of my uncle, Esmaeil Novtash who passed away just as I was defending this thesis, a man who always brought great happiness and joy to the lives of those around him.



**Esmaeil Novtash**

April 1, 1957 – August 27, 2014

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The narrative study on which this thesis is based explored early childhood educators' *funds of knowledge* related to print literacy and play pedagogies. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) posit that *funds of knowledge* in Education refers to any culturally rooted knowledge found within communities. Preschool educators participate in professional communities and a variety of other communities across several domains of practice. Hence their *funds of knowledge* include, but are not limited to any *funds of knowledge* obtained throughout the course of life. *Funds of knowledge* in Education has most commonly referred to students' practices. However this study focused on early childhood educators' (ECEs') *funds of knowledge*. Specifically, the inquiry drew on individual interviews with six registered early childhood educators (RECEs) employed in Ontario, Canada. I asked each educator to discuss their experiences with play pedagogies and their attitudes and beliefs about play and print literacy. The purposes of the study were: (1) to understand each ECE's subjective views about how to support young children's print literacy; (2) to understand ways in which ECEs viewed play as a contributing factor in children's print literacy development; and (3) to understand how ECEs appropriated their understandings of the relationship between play and print literacy.

#### 1.1 The Research Questions

My interest in play and what Roskos and Christie (2011b) call the *play-literacy interface* began during my pre-service education for Early Childhood Education four years ago. Often times, the knowledge I acquired through my courses conflicted with

what I observed in the field. For example, my pre-service program endorsed the play-based approach; however, none of the educators who sponsored my field placements had adopted this approach. In my program I was taught how to use my observations of students to plan a curriculum using the Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007); however, none of my field placements used this document at their childcare centre. But lack of awareness of the ELECT document did not seem to be the barrier to enacting *play-based* pedagogy. ECEs themselves expressed to me that they were struggling to implement *play-based* pedagogy within their classrooms. They felt that their struggles were not due to lack of knowledge needed to inform their practice, but rather they said they felt forced to conform to the institutional routines that governed their practices.

My study also responds to claims in the research literature that ECEs lack the theoretical knowledge to support effective early literacy practices (e.g. Lynch, 2010; Stahl & Yaden, 2004). I now wonder if the perception of a disconnect between theory and practice might be a consequence of “ways in which we think about theory and practice” (Eisazadeh & Stooke, 2013, p. 31). By learning about ECEs’ *funds of knowledge* in relation to early literacy and by exploring reasons why ECEs consider some practices to be *best-practices*, I sought to shed light on an area of literacy pedagogy that has personal significance, implications for children’s success at school and for preschool educators’ professional identities.

My study asked the following questions: (1) What can be learned about preschool educators’ *funds of knowledge* from stories of practice about print literacy pedagogies? (2) What beliefs about the role of play in young children’s literacy are expressed in those

stories? (3) What obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies are expressed? (4) What do stories of practice reveal about the extent to which they value play? (5) What do stories reveal about the ways in which beliefs about play mediate planning of curricular experiences?

## **1.2 Context and Background**

My study was conducted at a time when major early childhood education and care policy and curriculum changes were being implemented in Ontario and internationally. My participants' stories of practice led me to wonder how these policies and curricular changes may be shaping preschool educators' understandings of their roles with play pedagogies.

For example, a seemingly simple change to the naming of services and programs for young children can have dramatic consequences for practice. Services for young children used to be called early childhood care and education (ECCE). Now they are called early childhood education and care (ECEC) to encompass more of a reciprocal relationship between care and education (Nutbrown, Clough, & Selbie, 2008) and to acknowledge every child's right to education from birth (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006). The change from care and education to education and care can make a difference to preschool educators' understandings of their roles. For many of the practitioners I worked with, education appeared to hold greater importance than care. Valuing education is not wrong, but education can sometimes be understood as schooling and schooling in an "audit society" (Power, 1997) can mean that certain kinds of knowledge are privileged over others. This emphasis on schooling may account for the fact that so many preschool educators I meet tend to focus on academics.

They may feel too that their professional credibility is at stake. Policy makers' focus on school readiness puts early childhood educators in a difficult position. The educators may value care personally, but feel they should censor that value to avoid being marginalized as educators. Also, researchers who take a cognitive perspective toward literacy tend to highlight the prerequisite print literacy skills needed to succeed in school (e.g. Weigel & Martin, 2006) and this message could have contributed to the increased pressure educators employed in preschool classrooms feel to better prepare children for school.

Currently there is no consensus about what school readiness entails for young children (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000; Stooke, 2014). The American National Education Goal Panel (1992) agreed on five basic domains: health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence, approaches to learning, communication skills, and cognition and general knowledge (as cited in Saluja et al., 2000). However, Stooke (2014) also points out that there is an everyday understanding of the term. "In Canada, readiness usually means readiness to succeed academically and socially in grade one" (Stooke, 2014, p. 27). Communication skills, cognition and general knowledge often rank high among parents' and professionals' views about readiness and the emphasis on children's cognition and general knowledge can overshadow other areas of children's development such as health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence; approaches to learning, and communication. The insufficient amount of attention these domains receive as communities work toward school readiness may cause, for example, a lack of children's self-confidence, a struggle to communicate in public settings, an inability to make friends or construct one's own knowledge and problem solve.

It is worth noting that the connection between play and school readiness is widely recognized. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) (2006) proposes that “play nourishes every aspect of children’s development- it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life” (p. 2). This message is reiterated in recent professional advice documents and program guides for Ontario educators (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), 2010, 2014). The Ministry of Education documents suggest that ECEs who focus on the academic components of their curriculum in an effort to bridge the knowledge gap between preschool and kindergarten may not be providing early learners with a well-rounded educational experience; nor are they laying a foundation for a smooth transition into school. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2014) recently published document, *How Does Learning Happen?*, states that to support the key foundations for learning at all ages educational settings must include:

- (1) responsive relationships;
- (2) learning through exploration, play, and inquiry;
- (3) educators as co-learners;
- (4) environments as third teachers;
- (5) pedagogical documentation;
- (6) reflective practice and collaborative inquiry. (p. 14)

The complex and often troubling discourse on school readiness overlaps with a general vagueness that surrounds the notion of play. Just as there is no consensus about school readiness, there is no consensus about what *play-based* learning should look like. Play takes on many forms. Researchers tend to define play in relation to the purpose(s) of

their studies or in relation to the types of play present in their data. Some may define play as mere messing around whereas others may define play as a highly skilled process; one that creates a *third space* where young children can make meaning through multiple modes and representations (see for e.g. Levy, 2008; Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010). Some have even written that play is a form of literacy (e.g., Wohlwend, 2011, 2008a, 2008b).

These background stories were present in my participants' stories of practice and they were a source of some confusion as I reviewed the interviews. I came to believe that *play-based* pedagogy for my participants meant something other than what it meant to me as I conducted my literature review and I believe that my participants' understandings of play reflect a growing awareness of the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten (FDK) program document (OME, 2010). As I reviewed my participants' stories of practice, I wondered if the new curricular orientation in FDK and ECE classrooms more generally is creating tensions for ECEs. For example, in the stories, ideas about *emergent* curriculum appeared to be bumping up against ideas from some preexisting curricular approaches; for example *theme-based*, *Montessori*, *Core Knowledge*, *Waldorf* and *project-based* approaches, which were part of the ECEs' *funds of knowledge*. But more important to my study, the stories of practice seemed to focus more on specific curricular approaches (see Appendix E) rather than on literacy-related practices.

### 1.3 The Study

My inquiry employed a narrative case study approach to explore early childhood educators' storied experiences with print pedagogy. The use of narrative methods can provide "insights into the complexity of practice context" (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 227).



As Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) write, “Story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (p. 4).

A narrative lens made room for contextual interpretations of preschool educators’ *funds of knowledge* about literacy and play pedagogy. A narrative lens also provided a space for the participants and I to critically reflect on current ideologies surrounding print literacy pedagogies in preschool settings. I aimed to conduct research *with* rather than *on* participants, which is said to be a sine qua non of narrative research (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

In recruiting the participants for the study, I employed convenience sampling procedures (which is further discussed in Chapter three) to invite Ontario preschool educators who, at one point in time, served children between the ages of three and five. Interviews were scheduled and carried out over the course of two months. Each interview gathered information about participant’s past and current experiences with print literacy and play pedagogies. From each interview, interpretive stories (McCormack, 2004) were collaboratively constructed with the participants through member checking. These stories were critically analyzed by drawing close attention to motifs and some recurring ideas that I found most salient to the research questions.

#### **1.4 Organization of the Thesis**

In this chapter, I provided an introduction to my study and sketched a backdrop to the problem area. Chapter two presents and discusses the relevant bodies of research literature. Chapter three describes the study, its methodological underpinnings and the steps I took to conduct the study. Chapter four presents the interpretive stories I co-constructed with participants followed by samples of reflective notes that I found salient

to the analysis. Chapter five looks across the stories and provides a discussion of the data in relation to the research questions. Finally, Chapter six presents conclusions, implications and ideas for further study.

### **1.5 Concluding Remarks**

As mentioned, this thesis explores ECEs' *funds of knowledge* related to print literacy and play pedagogies. My goal is to provide a “rendition of how life is perceived” (Bold, 2012, p. 17) instead of seeking a fixed truth of participants' lived experiences with play and print literacy pedagogies. In so doing I aim to invoke critical conversation among education stakeholders about preschool educators' current practices with print and play. I hope that such a dialogue can lead to improvements in professional learning and ECEs' professional practices.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Overview

This chapter aims to contextualize the stories of practice presented later in the thesis with relevant research literature. As noted in the previous chapter, my study asked: What can be learned about preschool educators' *funds of knowledge* from stories of practice about print literacy pedagogies? What beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy are expressed in those stories? What obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies are expressed? What do stories of practice reveal about ways in which they value play? And lastly, what do stories reveal about the ways in which beliefs about play mediate planning of curricular experiences?

To prepare the chapter, I reviewed research literature relevant to the above questions. Specifically I searched for literature pertaining to the theoretical construct, *funds of knowledge* and reviewed reports of studies that employed *funds of knowledge* in their analyses. I also examined literature that discusses preschool educators' beliefs and practices about literacy and literature on *school readiness* as a construct and an issue that affects the professional lives of ECEs. I begin the chapter with a discussion of the research in the field of *early childhood literacy* and an overview of research that examines relationships between young children's play and their meaning making practices.

To conduct my search I employed the Western library system's Education Graduate Program Databases, most often the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) database. I read all the accessible abstracts and reviewed the full-text versions of

the most relevant papers. Reference lists from studies authored by key scholars in the field were also reviewed to discover possible additional sources. While not all reviewed studies identified the methodologies employed by the authors, it is evident that this body of literature contains empirical studies that employed quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches, including ethnographies, case studies, experimental studies, narrative studies, and action research studies.

## **2.2    *Early Childhood Literacy***

Definitions of literacy are broader than in the past and they reference both sociocultural and social semiotic theories. This section traces the history of thinking about young children's literacy and explains the term *early childhood literacies*. My overview builds on an existing literature review (Stooke, 2010) and is augmented by references to recent book chapters, and other research articles found using the ERIC database. My search terms included *early literacy*, *emergent literacy*, *early childhood literacy*, *multimodal literacy* and *multiliteracies*.

Gillen and Hall (2003) write that contemporary conceptions of *early childhood literacy* are distinct from earlier conceptions of young children's literacy. The earlier conceptions focused on print. Also, literacy was often assessed as children's ability to read. Reading and writing were taught as separate subjects and it was not until the 1980s that they were taught together in English-speaking countries such as Canada (Stooke, 2010). In early research on reading, reading itself was also defined narrowly and was often categorized as a "perceptual activity" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 4).

Readiness to read was a dominant idea in the years following World War II. For much of the twentieth century, pedagogical practices were based on the idea that being

physically and mentally ready should precede formal literacy teaching (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Such maturationist assumptions preceded Piaget's work, but they align with the Piagetian notion that a certain level of development precedes learning (Wink & Putney, 2002). It was not until the late twentieth century that maturationist perspectives were successfully contested. However, since the 1960s, cognitive psychology has also had a profound influence on research into children's literacy development.

Purcell-Gates, Jacobson and Degener (2004) distinguish cognitive from social practice approaches to literacy research. They list three major constructs explored through the cognitive lens. The first construct draws attention to the processing of sound/symbol relations and their influence on children's abilities to predict texts. Some researchers (e.g. Rumelhart, 1994) argue that children simultaneously process syntactic, semantic, orthographic, lexical, semiotic and phonetic information when reading texts (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). The second construct is a *schema*, which revolves around the notion that children acquire new knowledge by associating the new knowledge to prior knowledge. In so doing, children integrate the new information with the old. Anderson and Pearson (1984) link the concept of *schema* to the development of reading skills such as decoding, skimming and summarizing. These *schemata* were thought to develop for various types of texts (e.g., expository verse non-expository or fairytale verse poems) (Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

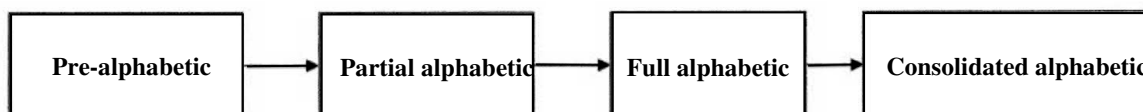
The third construct that distinguishes the cognitive perspective from sociocultural theories is *stages of development*. This construct was influenced by the Piagetian notion that children must pass through one stage of development before moving onto the next. There are various notions that illuminate stage theories (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton &

Johnson, 1996; Chall, 1983; Ehri, 1999). These notions of literacy development are shown in Table 2.1, Figure 2.1 and Table 2.2.

Table 2.1 Chall's Stages of Reading Development

Age	Stage
0-6 years	Pre-reading- letter recognition begins
6-7 years	Initial Reading- phonological awareness and decoding begin
7-8 years	Confirmation Fluency- begins to read fluently
8-14 years	Reading to Learning New Information- begins reading expository texts
14-18 years	Multiple Viewpoints- begins reading critically from multiple viewpoints
18+ years	Construction and Reconstruction- able to construct their own view point

Figure 2.1 Ehri's Model of Phases of Learning to Read



Source: Beech, 2005

Table 2.2 Bear et al.'s Writing Stages

Age	Stage
1-7 years	The Emergent Stage- scribbling, pretend writing, drawing, some letter-like shapes, but no sound symbol matching.
5-9 years	The Beginning Stage- is a time of progress from copying one or two word phrases to composing half page retelling of events or stories. Children use invented spellings with increasing success and memorize spelling of irregular words.
6-12 years	The Transitional Stage- planning, organization and general fluency.
10+ years	The Intermediate and Specialized Writing Stage- fluency, expression and knowledge of genres such as arguments. Voice becomes more obvious in this stage.

Source: Adapted from Stooke, 2010

It was during the 1970s that researchers began to notice literacy development was taking place before children received any formal literacy instruction (Gillen & Hall, 2003). The following statement was made by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982):

It is absurd to imagine that four- or five-year-old children growing up in an urban environment that displays print everywhere (on toys, on billboards and road signs, on their clothes, on TV) do not develop any idea about the cultural object until they find themselves sitting before a teacher. (p. 12)

Discussions about early literacy learning also assumed that teaching only happened with trained professionals in schools. Scholars began researching this problem area and found that even babies of twelve months used language in meaningful and purposeful ways (e.g., Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Halliday, 1973). Since the 1970s the preschool years have been regarded as a time to support children's language and literacy development (Sjuts, Clarke, Sheridan, Rispoli, & Ransom, 2012; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). The term *emergent literacy*, coined by Marie Clay in 1969, was used to refer to a period, usually during early childhood, in which children's literacy skills progress toward automaticity<sup>1</sup> and fluency<sup>2</sup> (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). *Emergent literacy* made major contributions to *early childhood literacy* (Gillen & Hall, 2003) and expanded the view of literacy to include various modes such as auditory, visual, verbal and action modes (Gillen & Hall, 2003; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). It also increased the value in children's capacities to acquire language and literacy skills at a young age (Gillen & Hall, 2003). Yet critics claimed that the *emergent literacy* perspective was disadvantageous to

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<sup>1</sup> The term automaticity refers to "the ability to read most everyday words in English at a glance" (Stooke, 2010, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> Fluency refers to "the ability to read a passage with expression and at a conversational pace" (Stooke, 2010, p. 16).

children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, especially children who were learning English as an additional language (Stooke, 2010). Such concerns drew attention to sociocultural research surrounding literacy practices.

The sociocultural perspective, which addresses the interrelatedness of language, culture and development, is derived from Vygotsky's learning theory (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978). Concepts such as "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), "structuring situations," "apprenticeship" (Rogoff, 1990) and "assisted performance" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) became increasingly popular as sociocultural theories gained momentum. Researchers began to consider that the development of literacy might actually have a "social element" (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 4) and this gave rise to the notion that "communication, especially written communication, was a complex, multilayered, and a highly skilled process" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 5).

Relevant to my study is the statement that children use a variety of modes to make meaning before and after they learn to read and write in the traditional sense. Kress (2009) states that "a mode is a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning" (p. 54), for example through "image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image and soundtrack" (p. 54). Gillen and Hall (2003) point out that in using a variety of modes to make meanings, children "select the best possible means for doing it. What is best . . . may come from different modes, means and material, regardless of whether adult culture uses or sanctions such selections" (p. 9). The promotion of various modes in literacy teaching is said to free children from the mundane and traditional approaches to reading and writing (Mackey, 2006) and to engage young children's attention in stories and visual games (Stooke, 2009).



An important idea in *early childhood literacy* research since the 1970s is the idea that literacy practices drive and are driven by children's interests (e.g., Hodge & Kress, 1993). Pahl (1999) found that children "start working in one particular mode . . . then moved across modes as their interest demands" (p. 17). Multimodality is not a new practice, but because of increased interest in the production and use of new media, popular culture and technologies, it has become more visible to educators (e.g., Mackey, 2006; Mills, 2011; Rowsell, 2006; Stooke, 2009). Stooke (2009), for example, notes that the line between print and digital culture has become increasingly blurred. And there is evidence that children increasingly think, communicate and comprehend texts in multimodal and *multiliterate* ways (Heydon, 2013; Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011).

*Multimodal literacy theory* is one strand of *multiliteracies* theory. Lapp, Flood, Heath and Langer (2009) define *multiliteracies* as "all media forms that combine iconic images, symbolic systems and conventions of presentation" (p. 3). *Multiliteracies* theory (e.g., New London Group, 1996) suggests that print literacy is not an activity that merely involves the use of print, but rather involves a vast array of activities that embrace children's use of multiple modalities to make meaning of written language through their social milieux (Gillen & Hall, 2003, pp. 8-9). Rowsell (2006) states that "multiliteracies . . . changed the way we learn and practice literacy [today]" (p. 15). Because of this change, considerable attention is now paid to exploring the ways in which children and educators use *multiliteracies* (e.g., Hani, 2013; Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin, Powell & Wohlwend, 2012; Simon, 2011). It is said that if students are to succeed in the current digital age, then a broader definition of literacy must be endorsed (Hesterman, 2011).

Although recent conceptions of *early childhood literacy* have shifted towards the sociocultural arena, cognitive conceptions of literacy continue to dominate school literacy discourses and education policies. In fact, scientifically-based research studies on literacy saturate educational policy literature and the emphasis on the cognitive perspective has created a legacy that will continue for some time (Stooke, 2010). My reading on the topic leads me to advocate for educators to adopt the broad definition of literacy suggested by *early childhood literacy*. However, my interviews with educators focused on their views about play and print literacy. This decision was related to the original motivation for the study – to explore preschool teachers’ *funds of knowledge* related to print literacy development.

Purcell-Gates et al. (2004) define print literacy as “reading and writing of some form of print for communicative purposes inherent in people’s lives” (p. 26). It is important to note, however, that my study recognizes the ways in which print literacy involves the use of various modalities. I also assume that within *multiliteracies* theory print too is embraced as a literate practice. Eisazadeh and Stooke (2013) provide examples of how ECEs can implement culturally responsive print literacy pedagogies in meaningful and purposeful ways by drawing on *multiliteracies* theory. Although there is no “consensus about the nature of print literacy, about how it develops, or about how best to teach print literacy to beginners” (Stooke, 2010, p. 12), there is compelling evidence that learning is enhanced when learners engage in literacies for authentic reasons (e.g., Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Lenters & McTavish, 2012).

### **2.3     *Play and Literacy***

A topic addressed in numerous discussions about early childhood curricula and

*early childhood literacy* is the role of play in young children's meaning making. Some scholars have written about a *play-literacy interface* (e.g. Roskos & Christie, 2001b). Others have written that play is a form of literacy (e.g. Wohlwend, 2008a, 2008b). Resources for this section were drawn from the ERIC database. Search terms employed in the review of play and literacy literature included (1) play and literacy; and (2) play literacy interface. I limited the search to resources focused on the field of early childhood education. I also limited the search to include only those resources that were peer-reviewed. The literature reviewed contains book chapters, literature reviews, research articles, meta-analyses and synthesis articles.

The term *play* refers to many activities. Play is said to take on many forms; “ranging from unstructured ‘messing around’ to high-level socio-dramatic play” (Roskos & Christie, 2011a p. 74). The literature defines play in a variety of ways. It is said that researchers have a proclivity towards defining play in relation to the purpose(s) of their study and the types of play present in their data (Cheng & Johnson, 2010). Anderson (1995) defines play through these perspectives: (1) exploratory<sup>3</sup> (2) evolutionary<sup>4</sup> and (3) developmental<sup>5</sup>. When literacy conceptions such as *emergent literacy* surfaced within the research literature on *early childhood literacy*, the *play-literacy interface* attracted researchers' attention (Hall, 1987; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Currently, the *play-literacy interface* (sometimes referred to as the *play-literacy nexus*) encompasses a broad

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<sup>3</sup> Exploratory play refers to the way children explore the world around them which in turn develops their practice skills (Hampshire Play Policy Forum, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Evolutionary play refers to the supple aspects of play when unforeseen events take place (Salthe, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Developmental play refers to “aspects of play [that] include the more predictable structures of play associated with children's social, cognitive, language, physical and creative development from infancy through the primary years” (Stegelin, 2005, p. 77)

definition: “a space where play, language, and emerging literacy behaviors converge and interact [with one another]” (Roskos & Christie, 2011b, p. 204). Some researchers refer to this space as a *third space* (e.g. Levy, 2008; Lysaker et al., 2010). Lysaker et al. (2010) point out that a *third space* in fact functions “as a particular kind of zone of proximal development” (ZPD) (p. 209), a construct proposed by Vygotsky that I discuss in the next section. It is important to note that as new literacies (e.g., digital literacies) enter into the mix, the *play-literacy interface* extends its definition of literacy beyond print literacy. Several recent studies have explored ways in which new literacies fit within the *play-literacy nexus* (e.g., Ashton, 2005; Howard, Miles, & Rees-Davies, 2012; Levy, 2008; Wohlwend, 2009a; Yelland, 2011).

Substantial bodies of scholarly and professional literature link play to the development of print literacy in young children. Collectively the studies suggest that (1) play provides situations that promote literacy opportunities, skills and strategies; (2) play serves as a language experience where children can move across various modalities; and (3) play serves as a catalyst for both teaching and learning (Cooper, 2005; Walker & Spybrook, 2011; Wellhousen & Giles, 2005). This synopsis echoes an earlier review by Roskos and Christie (2001). It is worth noting that although pretend play is a powerful resource for meaning making, some researchers point out that “this kind of play offers a limited opportunity for planned, extended discourse” (De Haan, 2005, p. 41). Some studies have found that indirect pedagogies associated with play pedagogies have had little impact on children’s language and literacy development when compared to direct instructional practices (Chien et al., 2010). However, play advocates contest such claims, suggesting that at times “researchers have misunderstood children’s cognitive, social and

physical development due to errors in measurement (faulty tests or tools), limited observations in school settings, and short-range, rather than longitudinal, studies” (Harlin, 2008, p. 125). Moreover, other researchers have shown through neurological brain scans that exploratory play optimizes cognitive development in young children; that language and early literacy are enhanced through print-rich, multimodal environments; and that socio-dramatic play enhances children’s social competence (Stegelin, 2005).

Considerable evidence has shown that social symbolic play, in particular, is closely linked to the development of children’s print literacy (Boyle & Charles, 2010; Hatcher & Petty, 2004; Nicolopoulou, Ilgaz, & Brockmeyer, 2010). This may be due to the fact that social symbolic play, more commonly referred to as dramatic play, harnesses language forms that are more complex than the language used in regular conversations (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, & Soderman, 1998); for example social symbolic play enhances narrative language<sup>6</sup>, expository language<sup>7</sup>, and metacognitive language<sup>8</sup> (Pellegrini & Galda, 2000), and story dictation and dramatization support children’s psychosocial, language and narrative development (Cooper, 2005). Recently, researchers have shown how social symbolic play can act as a catalyst for *multimodal literacy* teaching and learning (e.g., Cohen & Uhry, 2011; Wohlwend, 2008a, 2008b). The *early childhood literacy* researcher, Karen Wohlwend (2008b) argues that children at play demonstrate at least three behaviours recognized as literate behaviours:

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<sup>6</sup> Narrative language refers to the support children receive from “functionally explicit play materials such as action figures, pretend kitchen, or the envelopes and stamps used to stock a post office dramatic play centre” (Stooke, 2009, p. 252). These play props help children understand how materials should be used in the real world.

<sup>7</sup> Expository language refers to the support received from “functionally ambiguous play props” (Stooke, 2009, p. 252). Children negotiate the meanings of these play props.

<sup>8</sup> Metacognitive language refers to when children “talk about their thinking processes” (Stooke, 2009, p. 251), like when they set up rules for their games.

- 1) [They] try out available social practices such as expected conventions for conversation or handling communication tools.
- 2) [They] explore multimodally to discover the material qualities of images and objects and use these qualities for understanding and producing signs.
- 3) [They] construct social spaces in peer culture within the classroom by pretending a person, thing, or place is someone, something, or somewhere else through multimodal orchestration of talk, image, gaze, gesture and sound effects. (p. 130)

Related to the idea that play is a form of meaning making is the finding that multiple modes of engagement and multiple means of representations promote automaticity and a life-long love for literacy acquisition (e.g., Brand & Dalton, 2012). Some scholars have investigated ways in which play affirms children's identities (e.g., Kendrick, 2005; Kraus, 2006; Wohlwend, 2009b, 2009c). Kendrick (2006), for example, shows that play can reveal the ways children position themselves in the world. Others have reconceptualized toys and other play artifacts as identity texts (e.g., Wohlwend, 2009c). Many have explained how dramatizing stories feeds a child's sense of self as a competent, literate individual (e.g., Kraus, 2006). And Figueroa-Sanchez (2008) posits that play helps children to have "a strong sense of self, recognize who they are in the world, and make sense of their own experiences and environment" (p. 304). In so doing children develop *emotional literacy* (Figueroa-Sanchez, 2008).

## **2.4 Literacy, Play and Social Constructivism**

Several scholars use Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism as a backdrop to the claim that oral language supports children's language and literacy

development and that literacy is a social practice (e.g., Alcock, Cullen, & George, 2008; Berkowitz, 2011; Kalmar, 2008; Kim, 2011; Massey, 2013). For this reason, I reviewed literature surrounding literacy, play and social constructivism. The resources for this section were predominately drawn from a book called *A Vision of Vygotsky* authored by Wink and Putney (2002) and augmented using resources I came across when reviewing literature for the other sections of this chapter. The literature I reviewed contains book chapters, research and synthesis articles.

Wink and Putney (2002) paid particular attention to Moll (1990), who posits that Vygotsky's work emphasizes the notion of "performance over competence" (p. 95), meaning that intrapersonal communication may be less important in learning than interpersonal communication (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 91). Intrapersonal processes involve children achieving self-competence, mastery and automaticity individually (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 91), but the Vygotskian perspective also views learning as an interpersonal process that takes place in a sociocultural milieu. In the sociocultural view, skills are learned interpersonally before they develop intrapersonally.

Vygotsky's learning theory suggests that if children are to develop print literacy skills, they must first be exposed to print in their social worlds. However, mere exposure to print-enriched phenomena is not sufficient to guarantee learning because children need to engage with social interactions around print in order for them to develop skills intrapersonally. The professional literature on print literacy and play places importance on the principle of scaffolding carried out by a more "capable peer" (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 109) in the social milieu. For example, the preschool ECE should seek to maximize opportunities for children to interact in literacy-rich play and provide adequate

scaffolding (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012). Using sophisticated language during children's play has been said to improve children's later language and literacy skills (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Magruder, Hayslip, Esinosa, & Matera, 2013). In using sophisticated language during free play, ECEs can enrich one aspect of the play environment. There are many other ways of optimizing children's play spaces in meaningful and purposeful ways. Several researchers provide examples of how ECEs can enhance children's language and literacy skills through fun and playful activities (e.g., Bingham & Pennington, 2007; Eisazadeh & Stooke, 2013; Fowler, Yates, & Lewman, 2007; Yopp & Yopp, 2009).

Another important sociocultural construct is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Wink and Putney (2002) posit that the zone of proximal development conceptualized by Vygotsky is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with "capable peers" (p. 86). Wink and Putney state that "play creates a zone of proximal development" (p. 102) where children "reach beyond their real selves as they take on the roles of the characters they choose to be, and take action appropriate to the behavioural rules that govern those roles" (p. 113).

## **2.5 Funds of Knowledge**

The search term *funds of knowledge* retrieved a wide range of articles and chapters. In order to limit the search to align with my study, I used (1) *funds of knowledge* in teaching and (2) *funds of knowledge* in early childhood education. The resources were drawn from the Education Graduate Program- Academic databases,



excluding Dissertations and Theses as well as Ulrich's Periodicals Directory. This review includes research articles and book chapters.

The term *funds of knowledge* was originally coined by Wolf (1966) within the discipline of anthropology. The early understanding of the anthropological term includes:

. . . information and formulas containing the mathematics, architecture, chemistry, physics, biology, and engineering for the construction and repair of most mechanical devices including autos, appliances and machines as well as methods for planting and gardening, butchering, cooking, hunting and of 'making things' in general. Other parts of such funds include information regarding access to institutional assistance, school programs, legal help, transportation routes, occupational opportunities, and for the most economical places to purchase needed services and goods. (Velez-Ibanez, 1988, p. 38)

It was a group of sociocultural literacy researchers named Luis Moll, Norma Gonzalez, James Greenberg, Carlos Velez-Ibanez and a few other scholars whose groundbreaking work brought *funds of knowledge* to Education scholarship. Moll et al., (1992) used the term to refer to any and all culturally rooted knowledge found within communities surrounding homes and schools. Gonzalez and Moll (2002) said that the term is "based on a simple premise . . . that people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (p. 625). This body of knowledge includes the skills and strategies acquired throughout one's life; for instance, the knowledge obtained when doing household tasks, shopping, or even communicating and socializing within the community (Hedges, 2012). Many scholars since then have investigated *funds of knowledge* within Education. Hedges (2012) refers to *funds of knowledge* as intuitive

sources and attributes attention to Hensley (2005) who points that *funds of knowledge* can be used across disciplines such as math, physical education, art as well as language and literacies. Students can draw on these tacit sources as a means to gain knowledge capital across disciplines. Similarly, teachers can draw on children's tacit sources as a means to capitalize on the efficacy of their teachings across disciplines.

The resources I found on *funds of knowledge* in education focus primarily on students' *funds of knowledge*, especially the ways in which educators incorporate students' *funds of knowledge* in the planning of curricular activities to improve their literacy teachings (e.g., Camangian, 2010; Heydon, Crocker, & Zhang, 2014; Hill, 1995, 2010; Mosley & Zoch, 2012; Moje et al., 2004; Newman, 2012), or their teachings in general (e.g., Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2011); for example, the ways in which they use students' *funds of knowledge* to improve their teachings for new English-language learners (e.g., Araujo, 2009; Dworin, 2006; Haneda & Wells, 2012), or for learners that have different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 1995; Irizarry, 2009; Martin-Jones & Saxena, 2003; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2007; Wang, Bernas, & Eberhard, 2005). Researchers also focused on how teachers incorporate students' *funds of knowledge* about technology (e.g., Labbo & Place, 2010) and new literacies (e.g., Wilhelm, 2012) in their teachings, or how teachers incorporate students' and parents' *funds of knowledge* to improve their teachings (e.g., Ghiaciuc, McIntyre, Kyle, & Sutherland, 2006; Xènia Saubich & Esteban, 2011). Some even drew attention to how students' *funds of knowledge* often go unrecognized by parents and teachers (e.g., Hsin, 2010).

Other literature focuses on the ways in which students draw on their own *funds of*

*knowledge* to support their learning (e.g. Barton & Tan, 2009; Heydon, 2013; Milne and Edwards, 2013). Some mark the benefits students receive from drawing on their own *funds of knowledge* (e.g., Pirbhai-Illich, 2010); or highlight play as a key indicator of children's *funds of knowledge* (e.g., Riojas-Cortez, 2001). And others pay attention to the usefulness of understanding students' *funds of knowledge* for preparing prospective teachers (e.g. Fitts & Gross, 2012; Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla 2003; Seiler, 2013). But despite the abundance of literature surrounding student's *funds of knowledge*, I found little mention of teachers' *funds of knowledge* and how their *funds of knowledge* contribute to pedagogical beliefs and practices. Hedges (2012) notes that this may be due to the fact that "*funds of knowledge* has [only] recently been extended to describe aspects of teacher knowledge" (p. 10). In my search through the literature I found a few studies that use the term *funds of knowledge* to extend the definition to include teachers' knowledge (e.g., Andrews, Yee, Greenhough, Hughes, & Winter, 2005; Brannon, Urbanski, Manship, Arnold, & Iannone, 2010; Gupta, 2006; Hedges, 2012, 2011; Kern, Roehrig & Wattam, 2012; Street, 2005; Monzo & Rueda, 2003). Some studies suggest that teachers' past experiences (*funds of knowledge*) shape their pedagogical beliefs and practices (Andrews et al., 2005; Gupta, 2006; Hedges, 2012, 2011; Kern et al., 2012; Monzo & Rueda, 2003). A study conducted by Street (2005) found a disconnect between some students' *funds of knowledge* and those of the teacher. And another study drew attention to the fact that *funds of knowledge* - whether belonging to students or teachers - often go unnoticed when it comes to literacy education because of the pressure for teachers to treat literacy as a commodity (Brannon et al., 2010).

The topic of teacher's *funds of knowledge* was important for my study, which

explored stories of practice told by preschool educators about their current print literacy pedagogies. I asked what these stories revealed about the ways in which the educators valued play, their beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy, what obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies they expressed, and the ways in which these stories revealed their ability to mediate their planning of curricular experiences for preschoolers.

## **2.6 Preschool Educators' Beliefs and Practices about Literacy**

It makes sense to think of pedagogical beliefs and practices as aspects of teachers' *funds of knowledge*. It has been said that educators' beliefs about literacy have an inherent relationship to their pedagogical practices (e.g., Lynch, 2009). In fact Lynch (2009) states, "to understand preschool teachers' practice, it is important to examine the beliefs about that practice" (p. 192). When searching the literature I used the search terms: preschool educators, literacy, and beliefs, which located over eight hundred items, but only forty nine resources were used for this review. In order to narrow down my search, I reviewed the abstracts of these eight hundred items and compiled only those abstracts most relevant for the purpose of my study. Only resources published within the last ten years were included in the review, including accounts of single-case research studies (e.g., Brown, Molfese, & Molfese, 2008; Connor, Morrision, & Slominski, 2006; Court, Merav, & Ornan, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2014), a book chapter (Wink & Putney, 2002), a meta-analysis article (Stahl & Yaden, 2004), and a published literature review (Dickinson, 2011).

Teachers' beliefs and practices are situated in curricular approaches. Heydon and Wang (2006), for example, relate pedagogical practices to curricular perspectives. They

suggest that early childhood curricular orientations run along a continuum from the *prescriptive* to the *emergent* curriculum. *Prescriptive* curricular orientations tend to value direct instruction (e.g., Nickse, 1993); are “tightly ordered and normalized” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 92), and do not take children’s interests into account (Heydon, 2013); nor do they use children as curricular informants (Harste, 2003). *Emergent* curricular orientations, however, value indirect as well as direct instruction (Nickse, 1993); view children as curricular informants (Harste, 2003) and are said to be “open and supple” (Heydon et al., 2014).

Some critical scholars argue that educators who position themselves within the cognitive domain sometimes construct literacy teaching and learning as commodities (e.g. Hibbert & Iannacci, 2005) and literacy acquisition as homogeneous, that is the same for everyone. According to Street (2005) this autonomous view also suggests that there can be a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning. Such a view is criticized on the grounds that it will disadvantage students who are already marginalized.

Since *play-based* learning is a major component within the current Ontario kindergarten program and informs discussions about preschool curricula, it is important to consider educators’ beliefs and practices in relation to current official curriculum documents, such as the *Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (OME, 2010) and *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007). There is evidence that play best serves children’s language and literacy development when a balanced approach to pedagogy is endorsed (Gupta, 2009). Activities should facilitate social/emotional development as well as other areas of children’s development such as bodily/kinesthetic and cognitive developmental areas.

Many have explored the ways in which to achieve this balanced approach to pedagogy for early learners (e.g., Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; Brand, 2006).

At the outset of my investigation, I was concerned about a perceived disconnect between preschool ECEs' beliefs and their practices in the areas of print literacy and play pedagogies (Foote, Smith, & Ellis, 2004; Gerde & Bingham, 2012; Gerde et al., 2012; Lynch, 2011; Miller, 2004; Phillips & Morse, 2011; Poole-Christian, 2010). A Canadian study conducted by Lynch (2011) found that although some preschool educators said they believed in intentional teaching of print literacy in ECE settings, one participant said there was no role for print literacy during play activities, even through "interactions with print abounded in dramatic play centres" (p. 330). Other researchers also found a discrepancy between ECEs beliefs and practices with literacy and play pedagogies. Foote et al., (2004) found that the ECEs who said they were committed to practicing "meaningful and purposeful literacy experiences within a *play-based* program" (p. 135), tended to favour formal skills-based instruction in their classrooms. Their beliefs did not translate into their classroom practices (Miller, 2004). Such findings can be explained with reference to teachers' lack of theoretical background knowledge to support rich pedagogies within preschool classrooms (Bauml, 2011; Foote et al., 2004; Ihmeideh, 2009; Lynch, 2011; Miller, 2004; Phillips & Morse, 2011; Stahl & Yaden, 2004). Yet other studies present preschool educators as knowledgeable (e.g. Hawken, Johnston & McDonnell, 2005; Lee, 2006).

There is agreement among researchers that an increase in professional development activities can improve the quality of ECEs' language and literacy-related

pedagogical practices (Beauchat, 2009; Breffni, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2014; Ganey, 2010; Lynch, 2011; 2009; Miller, 2004; O'Leary, Cockburn, Powell, & Diamond, 2010; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010) although, the attainment of advanced academic degrees alone does not result in high quality educational programming (Breffni, 2011).

Researchers recommend that professional development initiatives should reflect real-life practical experiences (Herzenburg, Price, & Bradely, 2005). Neuman and Wright (2010) and Neuman and Cunningham (2009) argue that a combination of coaching and professional development workshops is more effective than professional development workshops alone. Dickinson (2011) suggests that “the combination of curriculum, intensive coaching, and well-qualified teachers can result in substantial improvements” (p. 967) in pedagogical practice. But previous efforts have failed because of an inability to substantially alter educators’ capacity to support their students’ language and literacy skills (Dickinson, 2011). While some studies suggest that professional development courses and/or coaching influence educators’ attitudes, beliefs and practices, a recent study found that a professional development initiative that aimed to increase the value of play in children’s learning did not alter the educators’ practices. Rather, choices about practices were constrained by structured curricula (Einarsdottir, 2014). Einarsdottir (2014) notes that “their beliefs and practices in this regard seemed to be constrained by traditions in which play and learning are separate entities” (p. 93). Einarsdottir’s findings align with McMullen et al.’s (2006) findings that educators’ associate their beliefs with the specific curricular approach they are told to practice within their workplace.

Educators who work in childcare centres that employ preplanned curricula and teacher directed learning are said to have more academically-oriented beliefs, whereas those who

work in non-structured educational settings employ more developmentally appropriate pedagogy<sup>9</sup> (DAP) (McMullen et al., 2006). It seems that the efficacy of professional development courses that aim to alter educators' beliefs and practices is dependent upon individual choices and on characteristics of their work environments (Hamre et al., 2012). This finding illuminates the complex and variable nature of pedagogical beliefs and practices. A few scholars argue the need for critical reflection and reflexivity in order for there to be actual improvements in practice (Court et al., 2009; Gillentine, 2006; Heydon & Hibbert, 2010).

In contrast to the above findings, a study conducted by La Paro, Siepak and Scott-Little (2009) found that educators' beliefs do not alter as a result of teaching experiences. Their findings suggest that in teacher preparation programs, pre-service teachers' pedagogical beliefs are sometimes modified to align with their academic superiors' beliefs. This implies that professional experience is not always the major contributor in altering ECEs beliefs about good practices. Although, Heydon and Hibbert (2010) found that "literacy life histories" (p. 798) play a role in molding elementary teacher candidates' beliefs and practices regarding literacy. Heydon and Hibbert also acknowledge their own role as professors in affecting teacher candidates' learning. There is evidence that the important people and events in educators' lives- both past and present- influence their pedagogical beliefs and practices, including professors, co-workers, students and family members (Court et al., 2009). Similarly, Brown et al., (2008) investigated educators' beliefs and professional teaching experiences, but instead of focusing on the impact of

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<sup>9</sup> DAP refers to a continuum of children's development in early reading and writing developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and by the International Reading Association (IRA) (1998).



teaching experience on beliefs, Brown et al. focused on the impact of teaching experience on preschool students' literacy and mathematics learning. Findings suggest that teachers' educational attainment influences students' literacy development more so than teacher experience. But educators' literacy beliefs were weakly related to students' literacy enhancement. Ultimately, the studies have suggested that professors of teacher training programs and instructors of professional development courses should be held most accountable for disseminating DAP, especially for enhancing children's language and literacy skills during a time of educational reform.

Vartuli and Rohs (2009) found that pre-service ECEs' pedagogical beliefs shift over time. This variability in teachers' beliefs indicates that ECEs' sociocultural milieu and experiences have an impact on their pedagogical beliefs and practices and that these beliefs evolve with time. Nicholson and Reifel (2011) explored ECEs' perceptions of their experiences, particularly their pre-service training experiences and how they came to their current beliefs over time. Nicholson and Reifel's findings show two distinct responses from ECEs: (1) ECEs felt unprepared after their pre-service training; and (2) they felt they were forced to learn from their personal experiences as well as through observing and interacting with co-workers. This finding raises a concern. Although evidence suggests that teacher preparation programs aid novice ECEs in curricular decision-making for instructional practice, researchers note that there is cause for concern when pre-service ECEs do not fully understand DAP (Bauml, 2011). Bauml (2011) stipulates "without understanding developmentally appropriate pedagogy, new teachers may be unable to adopt or modify instructional practices and instead simply imitate what they observe- thus missing opportunities to promote students' learning" (p. 236). These

findings are consistent with the perceived notion that preschool educators may indeed lack the knowledge to effectively support their practices. They also emphasize Vygotsky's notion of the "collective" (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 97) and how ECEs' *funds of knowledge* are socially constructed and socially situated.

The literature on ECEs beliefs and practices is somewhat polarized. Stahl and Yaden (2004) cite data from four different observational studies conducted by Dickinson, McCabe and Anastasopoulous (2002) to argue that preschool teachers value children's physical, emotional, and social growth more than children's literacy development. Stahl and Yaden then compared these four observational studies with a study by Sayeski, Burgess, Pianta and Lloyd (2001), which surveyed various ECEs and their beliefs, practices and classroom environments. Data compiled from the four initial studies contradicted findings from the latter study. Stahl and Yaden pointed out that the ECEs who were observed in the four separate initial studies "were far less likely . . . to use language and literacy activities in their classrooms" (p. 155) than the 363 ECEs who were surveyed by Sayeski et al. These findings may suggest that what ECEs say they believe to be good practice is not what ECEs actually practice in the field. These findings may also suggest that ECEs attitudes, beliefs and practices are idiosyncratic in nature. Several studies provide evidence of idiosyncrasies (Connor et al., 2006; Lynch, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Scull, Nolan, & Raban, 2012; Tolchinsky, Bigas, & Barragan, 2012). Scull et al., (2012) found that preschool educators' understandings of *emergent literacy* differ from person to person. Preschool educators exhibit a range of different practices, which is dependant on their unique and particular views about how preschoolers develop their language and literacy skills (Scull et al., 2012). Similarly, a study conducted by

Connor et al. (2006) revealed “substantial variability in amount and types of language and *emergent literacy* activities, across classrooms and for the individual children within classrooms” (p. 665). Sherwood and Reifel (2010) in their study on teachers’ perception of *play-based* learning found that ECEs’ perception of play as a learning practice relied heavily on their personal experiences. These studies illuminate the variability of ECEs beliefs and practices and how their beliefs may shift over time.

Literature on teachers’ literacy-related beliefs and practices show that some educators miss opportunities to support children’s literacy learning through play (Gerde & Bingham, 2012; Gerde et al., 2012; Foote et al., 2004; Lynch, 2011; Miller, 2004; Phillips & Morse, 2011; Poole-Christian, 2010). These studies raise questions about preschool educators’ lack of theoretical knowledge to support their literacy-related practices. By contrast, other studies suggest that play is highly valued and willingly endorsed by ECEs in their literacy practices (Hawken et al., 2006). Recently research on the effects of professional development has become popular. A recent study, however, found that regardless of professional development initiatives to increase the value of play for children’s learning, educators who work in highly structured childcare settings with *prescriptive* curricula did not alter their pedagogical practices after receiving professional development education (Einarsdottir, 2014). These findings suggest that educators’ values and beliefs are not always positively correlated with their practices. The perceived disconnect between educator’s values and beliefs may be due to a number of reasons, but the one that was most frequently proposed was pressures to homogenize curriculum and pedagogies. By opening up a dialogue pertaining to educators’ idiosyncratic “literacy life histories” (Heydon & Hibbert, 2010, p. 798) and interpreting educators’ storied

experiences through many lenses, the present study questions this finding and seeks other possible explanations. This body of research raises questions about the source(s) of pressure to homogenize curriculum in preschools. For example, there is evidence from Canadian studies that suggest that the ways in which ECEs conceptualize their work and the ways in which others view their work have implications for their survival as a professional group (e.g. Langford, 2006, 2010, Langford et al., 2013).

The belief that children are “cognitively ripe between the ages zero to five” (Lazarus & Ortega, 2007, p. 54) is now a dominant discourse in the ECE policy arena. The discourse has put pre-school years on the map for teaching children precursor skills for academic success. It is also worth considering ways in which policy makers’ increased focus on young children’s *school readiness* affects the professional lives of early childhood educators (see e.g. Moss, 2010). More than ten years ago, Sally Lubeck (2000) stated that unless there was an end to “a political climate dominated by the language of standards and outcomes” (p. 274-275), educators’ commitment to appropriate pedagogical practices, like *play-based* practices, would erode. The FDK program and other programs like it actually promote *play-based* learning and aim to provide a balanced foundation for school, but the incorporation of programs for children as young as three years into public schools means that preschool educators are also more deeply “entangled in the promotion of school readiness” (Stooke, 2014, p. 28) than in the past.

Willis and Harris (2000) state that the “paths of literacy and politics [in particular] continue to be inextricably interwoven as we enter the 21 century” (p. 86). Certainly the literature on *school readiness* shows that politics and education are inseparable entities. Neoliberalism has influenced educators’ pedagogical beliefs and practices about literacy

on an international scale. As Hsueh and Barton (2005) have written: “[T]he sociopolitical and cultural beliefs in the early educational arena have changed” (p. 184). “[Y]oung children are increasingly entering academically rigorous school settings where an emphasis on accountability and standards has replaced an emphasis on child development” (Linder, Ramey, & Zambak, 2013, para, 1).

To sum up, the literature points to the existence of a number of barriers to *play-based* pedagogies though, the literature was largely silent about where preschool educators’ position themselves on what they currently value about play and how their values, attitudes and beliefs may have changed in recent years. My study explores those values, attitudes, and beliefs by examining educators’ stories of practice.

## **2.7 Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I reviewed studies pertaining to *early childhood literacy*, pedagogy, the *play-literacy interface*, *funds of knowledge* and preschool educators’ beliefs and practices about literacy. This body of literature, which aims to inform preschool educators’ pedagogical decision making, is framed by cognitive, sociocultural, and most recently, social semiotic theories (Gillen & Hall, 2003).

I presented literature on play and literacy, which is a topic prevalent in current education discussions pertaining to *best practices* for early learners. I also reviewed literature on the topic of *school readiness*, which informs policy makers’ recent burgeoning interest in preschool educators’ practices, and literature about *funds of knowledge*, a term that sociocultural literacy researchers use to explore cultural and linguistic resources used by children and adults in communities. I contend that *funds of knowledge* can apply equally to educators’ cultural and linguistic resources, including

their beliefs and practices about young children's literacies. The literature that pertains specifically to teachers' beliefs and practices found little evidence of a positive correlation between beliefs and practices.

As noted in this chapter, I undertook my investigation into preschool educators' beliefs about *early childhood literacy* and their stories of practice because, as a preschool educator, I was concerned about the perception that ECEs lack the theoretical knowledge about early literacy. In the next chapter I describe this study: its methodological underpinnings and the steps I took to conduct the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Study

Villaume (2000) proposes that advances in pedagogy are the result of a constant pursuit of investigating the discrepancies between beliefs and practices. My survey of literature on preschool teachers' beliefs and practices in the area of early childhood literacy provided conflicting evidence. Some studies suggested that ECEs lack the appropriate theoretical knowledge to support their day-to-day practices with print literacy and play pedagogy. Others suggested the opposite. My own concern to better understand ECEs' beliefs about early childhood literacy and the relationships among their beliefs and practices led me to develop a small-scale narrative case study. I interviewed six registered ECEs who had previously taught or currently teach at the preschool level in Ontario, Canada. These in-depth, semi structured interviews provided insights into their current pedagogical attitudes, values, beliefs and practices with play and literacy. The narrative case study approach allowed me to gather multifaceted accounts of preschool educators' experiences in relation to print literacy and play. As noted previously, I explored the following research questions:

- (1) What can be learned about preschool educators' *funds of knowledge* from stories of practice about print literacy pedagogies?
- (2) What beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy are expressed in those stories?
- (3) What obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies are expressed?
- (4) What do stories of practice reveal about the extent to which they value play?

- (5) And lastly, what do stories reveal about the ways in which beliefs about play mediate planning of curricular experiences?

### **3.1 Narrative Research Approaches**

Conducting narrative research is a complex process. According to Bold (2012) narrative inquirers “do not need a problem to solve, or questions to answer, but instead [they] focus on an experience that is of interest” (p. 37). This study was most interested in providing interpretive accounts of preschool educators’ experiences in relation to using theory to support their day-to-day practices. The epistemological and ontological perspectives I adopted for this study align with the narrative ontology which views the social world as one that is constructed and multilayered (Spector-Mersel, 2010) and a narrative epistemology that assumes behaviour and their meanings are socially situated, socially interpreted and culturally ingrained.

This study adhered to two basic principles. First, researchers must treat stories of practice as objects for examination (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In so doing the researcher may notice that an overarching story or meta-narrative emerges that is multifaceted and can hold various other stories within it, some of which contradict each other. By adhering to this principle the various stories bumping against or hidden beneath the master narrative can be reconstructed, deconstructed and co-constructed to make visible the “complexity and multiplicity of lived experiences” (Iannacci, 2007, p. 57). To this end, I was able to attend to the untold or unspoken stories; or other plausible stories that were not explicitly provided during the data collection phase of this study, instead of attending to the traditional story, one with a rigid beginning, middle and end. The second principle expands on the idea of providing a holistic account by addressing four basic rules: (1)



adopt a multidimensional and interdisciplinary lens; (2) treat the story as a whole unit; (3) pay attention to form and content; and (4) context (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 214). The literature on narrative inquiry stipulates that researchers understand “the tentative and variable nature of knowledge. They accept and value the way in which narrative investigators are present in their texts” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). For this reason I included my own voice as well as those of my participants in my reporting of data in Chapter four. I aim to make visible participants’ stories as well as my own and how my interpretive lens was applied to the reading of participants’ experiences with print and play pedagogies. I reflected on the ways in which I influenced the results of this study.

I reflected upon a series of questions that helped identify the ways in which I may have influenced the stories provided during the interviews. I asked myself: as researcher, how I was positioned in relation to the participants and how I was responding emotionally and intellectually to each participant. For example, during an interview one participant asked me what my positioning was in regards to *play-based* pedagogy. I reflected on the ways in which my response to her questions may have altered her response to the interview questions that followed. I included such reflections in Chapter four following each interpretive story.

My inquiry draws on notions of narrative inquiry as relational inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2006; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010). By attending to the relationship with my participants and those relationships within their stories, I aimed to attend to the complexity and multiplicity of their stories of practice. That is, I practiced “wakefulness” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 82) to capture the complexities existent within the master narrative. As already mentioned, my goal was to provide “a rendition of how life is

perceived” (Bold, 2012, p. 17) instead of seeking a single story (Clough, 2002). I called into question my participants “cover stories” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 87) and my own “smooth stories” (p. 82) when writing the report.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

My sources of data included interviews, a reflective diary and personal narratives, including my own. I conducted six separate interviews with participants and after each interview I presented participants with my personal narrative and invited them to write their personal narrative. In so doing, I encouraged the participants to be critical of my personal narrative as well as to be critically reflective about their literacy beliefs and practices.

### **3.3 Recruitment of Participants**

I invited six preschool educators from four childcare sites that served children between the ages of three to five. Because my study is qualitative in nature and sought to capture personal narratives, I employed convenience sampling procedures to recruit the participants of this study, meaning that individuals were sampled as the research developed.

Convenience sampling was easy to set up. It is ideal for graduate student research because it is less time consuming and less expensive than some other sampling procedures for qualitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Given my limited time as a master’s student and limited resources this type of sampling procedure was a good fit. Convenience sampling also allowed me to attend to contextual influences and accept the variance in participants’ stories. As Bold (2012) states, “understanding how individuals are affected by different contextual influences through a narrative

approach, is more likely to help ... [researchers] provide the most appropriate support for the ... [participants under study]” (p. 21).

The six participants of this study were all women: Penny, Nina, Erica, Steph, Sarah and Diana (pseudonyms used). They all made reference to childcare centres that adopt a range of different curricular approaches. Penny, who has been working as a RECE for eight years and Nina, who has been working in the ECE profession for fourteen years, both work at a childcare centre that adopts a *theme-based* approach. Erica has been in the ECE profession for thirty years and has been working at the same childcare centre since. Her centre adopts an eclectic curricular approach. Diana also entered the ECE profession thirty years ago but she is currently not practicing. Diana’s stories of practice referenced curricular approaches that were also thematic. Steph and Sarah have been in the profession for three years. Steph’s childcare centre adopts both the *Core Knowledge* and *Montessori* approach whereas Sarah’s centre adopts an academically oriented curricular approach.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

I used what Cohen, Manion, et al. (2011) call the “interview guide approach” (p. 413) to collect data during interviews. According to Cohen, Manion, et al., the “interview guide approach” (p. 413) allows the researcher to stay on topic, but also encourages conversational dialogue. By using conversation to collect data during interviews, I was able to learn a lot about participants’ beliefs about literacy and play pedagogy to encourage the flow of their stories (Bold, 2012). Interviews were loosely structured. Structured interviews do not provide flow or invite a temporal account of experiences. In

fact, it is said that structured questions provide “little flexibility in relating the interview to particular individuals and circumstances, [and the] standardized wording of questions . . . constrains and limits [the] naturalness and relevance of questions and answers” (Cohen, Manion, et al., 2011, p. 413). Once each interview came to a close, participants were invited to reflect on my personal narrative and to write personal narratives of their own about their literacy practices. Participants’ personal narratives were collected several weeks after their interview.

### **3.5 Interpretive Stories and Member Checks**

I viewed each transcription through the lenses of narrative processes, language, context and moments. Each of these lenses “highlight both the individuality and the complexity of a life” (McCormack, 2000, p. 282). Before viewing the transcripts, I immersed myself in the data to (1) check the accuracy of the transcriptions and; (2) reflect on any initial reactions I had to the stories told during the interview that might later influence analysis (McCormack, 2004). McCormack (2004) calls this process active listening. I recorded my response to the following questions in a reflective diary for each interview:

- Who are the characters in this conversation?
- What are the main events? Where/When do they occur?
- As researcher, how am I positioned in relation to the participant?
- As researcher, how am I positioned during this conversation?
- How am I responding emotionally and intellectually to this participant?

(McCormack, 2000, p. 288)

McCormack (2004) proposed that when participants tell stories they include

specific narrative processes to enrich their stories. McCormack states that these stories have:

. . . recognizable boundaries; a beginning (an orientation describing who, what, where and when) and an end (a coda which brings the story to a close). Included within these boundaries is an abstract (summarizes the point of the story), an evaluation (highlights the point) and a series of linked events/actions organized chronologically or thematically in response to the question: And then what happened?" (p. 224)

The narrative processes include, argumentation, theorizing, description and augmentation. McCormack explains that the term argumentation refers to an abstract element that may not come from a story already told but rather from an outside story; theorizing refers to when a "storyteller may become reflective, trying to work out 'why?', attempting to theorize their experience" (p. 224); description refers to the details said about "particular people, places, or things" (p. 224); and the term augmentation refers to the added "information to stories already told as the conversation stimulates recollection of additional story pieces" (p. 224). Rosenthal (1993) refers to the first three as "styles of presentation" (p. 69). McCormack added the latter narrative style after noticing that some of her participants for her doctoral research added information to previous stories told in their interviews. For this study, I was able to locate and identify all four narrative processes in interview transcriptions. But first, I identified the stories from each transcript and separated them from the main text. The boundaries of each story were then identified and clearly documented within the transcripts. As did McCormack, titles were given to these stories based on the evaluation (the point) of each story. The narrative processes

were then incorporated back to enrich the stories I identified and separated from the text. For some participants, I constructed new stories through any additional information presented during our interview and identified these stories in Chapter four by using third person.

Language is another lens I used to reflect on how my participants constructed their identities. McCormack (2004) identifies three language features that I used to reflect on for each transcription: (1) what is said; (2) how is it said; and (3) what remains unsaid. McCormack describes the first language feature as: word groupings; words that assume common understandings; words that make space for thought; specialized vocabularies; words used to talk about self-image, relationships and their environment. McCormack describes the second language feature as: active/passive voice; speech functions (e.g., statement, commands, exclamations and etc); pronouns (where they were used); internal vs. internal/external dialogue; and imagery. McCormack describes the third language feature as: silence; tone; speed of delivery; inflections; emotions; volume and hesitations. Viewing transcripts through these lenses helped me construct interpretive stories that I believed align with the ways participants constructed their own identities. It also helped me locate areas within the text where tensions may have been present (i.e., paying close attention to what remained unsaid).

Next I examined context. I examined participants' stories using the context of situation and the context of culture (Halliday, 1985). When examining the context of situation, I looked more closely at the interactions between participants and researcher during each of the interviews. When examining the context of culture, I looked more closely at what each story of practice meant in relation to the wider society. After careful

examination of each transcript, I recorded my response to the following questions in my reflective diaries concerning the context of situation:

- What can be learned from the participant's response to my opening question and to my wind-up question?
- What can be learned about our interactions from the appearance of the text?  
For example: the number of questions and answers; who asks the questions; the type of questions; who interrupts whom, and where and how frequently does this occur?
- What can be learned about our interaction from what is not said in the text?  
For example: Does the participant ask me a question without giving me time to respond? Are there places in the interview transcript where I feel I could have responded but didn't? Why didn't I respond? (McCormack, 2004, p. 226)

I then recorded my response to any of the following questions that resonated with each individual transcript concerning the context of culture:

- What cultural fictions does each person draw on to construct his/her view of what counts as being a person?
- How have these ways of talking, thinking and being positioned each individual? Where does she/he conform to them? Where does she/he resist or challenge them? Where does she/he rewrite them? (McCormack, 2004, p. 226)

Viewing the transcripts in these ways illustrated tensions within each story. The best way to describe viewing transcripts through this lens is to say that I reflected on any and all

significant moments that had an impact on the meaning of the stories told. The term moments includes but is not limited to surprises; strangeness; insight; bewilderment; sadness; joy; contradiction, confusion; self-questioning or; epiphanies (McCormack, 2000).

Creating interpretive stories is an improvisational process. Table 3.1 illustrates the two steps I followed to construct an interpretive story for each participant.

**Table 3.1 Summary of the process of constructing an interpretive story**

Steps	Tasks
Step 1: Compose the story middle	Re-connect with the conversation through active listening. Locate the narrative processes in the transcript. Return enriched and constructed stories for comment and feedback. Respond to the participant's comments. Form the first draft of the interpretive story: List agreed story titles. Temporal ordering of story titles. Add the text of each story. Redraft story middle: View the transcript through multiple lenses: language, context and moments. Take into account the views highlighted throughout these lenses.
Step 2: complete the story-add a beginning and ending	Compose an orientation and choose the title. Add coda. Use visual form and contextual strategies to enhance presentation. Share the story with the participant. Reflect on the story in light of the participant's comments. Write an epilogue.
<i>Source:</i> Adapted from McCormack, 2004	

Once I had created a “middle” for each participant, I shared the story with that participant and requested their feedback. I conducted two rounds of member checks. The first round was during step one (see Table 3.1). I reflected upon their feedback;



completed the remaining tasks of step one and moved on to step two as shown in Table 3.1. The second round of member checks was conducted during the construction of the interpretive story. This decreased the possibility that I was misrepresenting participants' accounts, but also provided me with the means to collaboratively construct the interpretive stories with participants. For each member check, participants were invited to respond to the following:

- Does what I have written make sense to you?
- How does this account compare with your experience?
- Have any aspects of your experience been omitted?
- Please include these wherever you feel it is appropriate.
- Do you wish to remove any aspect(s) of your experience from this text?
- Please feel free to make any other comments" (McCormack, 2000, p. 299)

### **3.6 Analysis**

There is no prescribed way to conduct a narrative analysis, but according to Bold (2012), "a narrative approach to analyzing [the phenomenon under study] . . . would highlight the range of different influences, . . . bring into discussion the range of potential causes and accept that sometimes we cannot provide a clear correlation between two events" (p. 21); or that "a single truth may not exist" (Clough as cited in Bold, 2012, p. 144). Bold states that "to apply a rigid analytical process is often inappropriate" (p. 123). Therefore, for my study I adopted, what is referred to as, a broad "experience-centred approach" (p. 123). This approach re-presents experience and aims to display transformation or change (Squire, 2008). Although Squire (2008) acknowledges that there is no one set way of conducting narrative research and analysis, she nevertheless

offers an anchor for the processes by which one can conduct an “experience-centred” (p. 45) approach to narrative research. According to Squire I can either put more focus on participants’ personal narrative with print pedagogy or focus more on making connections among participants’ responses. Since the study placed great importance on the unique and particular situations of each participant’s experiences, I employed the first suggestion, which Polkinghorne (1995) refers to as narrative analysis. Polkinghorne distinguishes the latter process as analysis of narrative.

In analyzing the data, first I identified key issues present in each participant’s stories of practice. I then triangulated the three data sources- interpretive stories, participants’ personal narratives, and my own reflective diaries- in order to further examine these issues. These issues came in the form of recurring ideas or motifs. It is important to note, however, that these recurring ideas and motifs were not connections made across all stories, rather connections among a select few stories of practice or motifs that I identified in single accounts.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Since my research involved the use of human subjects, the study was first submitted to the Western research ethics review process (Appendix D). Prior to interviewing participants, each participant was informed of the nature and scope of the study, at which point they were invited to sign informed consent documents (Appendix E).

As outlined by Bold (2012), narrative inquirers must consider moral, social, political and cultural issues when designing their research. Bold states that the researcher must maintain “respect for individuals” (p. 52) and have a “duty towards others” (p. 52). I

retell participants' stories as accurately and faithfully as possible. I also maintain anonymity of participants' identities through the use of pseudonyms and by omitting details that could reveal their identities. Bold also states that the researcher must aim to ensure that the knowledge gained from the research "improves social life; [is] inclusive" . . . ; [and] "challenges the participatory research" (p. 52). Upon completion of my master's degree, I will attempt to do so through publications and research presentations. And lastly, in regards to cultural issues, Bold states that the research must maintain "respect for diversity . . . [and maintain] different codes of ethics in different cultures" (p. 52). I have considered and attended to this ethical principle as well by recruiting participants from different cultural backgrounds and by being mindful that due to cultural differences interviews may have taken a different course.

Misrepresentation is a major ethical limitation commonly associated with the narrative methodology. For this study I ensured that the participants understood their roles and responsibilities as collaborators (Bold, 2012). The informed consent papers presented to each participant prior to each interview disclosed the appropriate information regarding what their duties entailed. Member checks were also carried out in order to address the concern of misrepresenting data. It is said that a more collaborative approach to narrative research offers readers a more balanced representation of participants' lives (Bold, 2012). Thereby a collaborative approach was employed to address any misrepresentation of participants' lived experiences.

A *sine qua non* of narrative research is that researchers are able to do research *with* instead of *on* participants (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). This gives my study a sense of verisimilitude. However this can also limit my study; for instance some

participants may have offered, what Clandinin et al. (2010) call “cover stories” (p. 87). I addressed this potential problem through reflexivity and through considering multiple interpretations of the stories of practice. In addition to participant “cover stories” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 87) as a potential limitation of the narrative methodology, researchers must also be mindful of their own interpretive stories: what is called “smooth stories” (Clandinin, et al., 2010, p. 82). Novice narrative inquirers may feel compelled to provide these so called “smooth stories” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 82) in order to avoid the tensions existent beneath the master narrative. So it was essential that I was mindful of how stories unfolded not only over time but also as the “angle of repose” (Richardson, 1994, p. 522) altered. I had to stay “awake” (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 82) to what was physically there as well as what were not, what was heard as well as the silence. This wakefulness and rigour in the analysis of gathered stories only strengthened the trustworthiness of study results, which I further address in the next section of this chapter.

### **3.8 Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility is described as the *truth* of one’s research, meaning whether the interpretive stories I present in Chapter four accurately represents participants’ lived experiences. Since this study takes on an interpretive stance, it is important to note that I do not claim to provide an objective truth about participants’ *funds of knowledge* with print literacy and play; rather I provide a “rendition of how life is perceived” (Bold, 2012, p. 17). In establishing a level of credibility within the interpretive perspective, however, I triangulated data sources, conducted member checks and carried out critical analysis

when writing the report. The sources I used to triangulate the data were: interviews, reflective diaries, and participants' personal narratives. In triangulating the data this way, I ensured that each interpretive account was well developed. A well-developed interpretation is said to provide a deeper and multilayered understanding of participants' lived experiences, which in turn strengthens the credibility of one's study. Member checks were also carried out in establishing credibility. Although member checks are traditionally used to address the ethical limitation of misrepresentation, which I mentioned in the previous section, its main role for this study was to provide an avenue to co-construct each interpretive account of participants' storied experiences. It is said that when the main role of member checking is to confirm accuracy of information, the underlying assumption is that there is a fixed truth to compare it to, but this fixed truth or reality is often rejected within the interpretive paradigm. As previously mentioned, I also used critical analysis in writing the report to establish credibility for this study. I attended to and discussed elements of the data that appeared to contradict with some of the recurring ideas present in stories of practice. In so doing, I was able to broaden and confirm some of the patterns that were emerging from the data. In order to strengthen my study's verisimilitude, I used a technique referred to as "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1949), meaning that I provided greater detail about participants' lived experiences when co-constructing each interpretive story. These detailed accounts of storied experiences with print literacy and play will help readers relate my findings to other situations and contexts, which establishes what Lincoln and Guba refer to as transferability. As mentioned, dependability is another factor to consider when evaluating the trustworthiness of study results. Dependability is measured by whether study results can

be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From an interpretive perspective, dependability cannot be achieved through techniques such as external auditing, where an outsider reviews and evaluates the viability of results. Such techniques assume that a fixed reality or truth exists, but as mentioned already narrative researchers provide multiple truths and reject that of an objective truth. Furthermore, results of this study are interpreted by the readers of the report; thereby the dependability of this study resides in readers' ability to find their own truth instead of assuming that there is indeed a fixed truth. It is worth noting that terms such as transferability and dependability are often rejected by narrative inquirers, but Lincoln and Guba's work make reference to such terms at a time when qualitative researchers were expected to show that their work was indeed as rigorous as more mainstream approaches. Finally I consider confirmability, which is defined as researchers' ability to stay neutral or provide full disclosure of personal opinions and potential bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established confirmability through reflexivity when writing the report. A reflexive dialogue in the report also provides readers with the room to make their own meanings from the report. It is through reflexive dialogue, Bold (2012) argues, that terms like validity, replicability and reliability, which are also rejected by narrative inquirers can be reconceptualized within the narrative framework. For instance, Bold states, "validity [within narrative] lies in the relevance of the lives explored, and their replicability . . . [lies] in the comparisons that readers make with the lived stories that they know" (p. 145). And lastly, reliability is found within the "stories that are common in many ways to others" (p. 145), which strengthens verisimilitude.

### **3.9 Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I provided a description of the narrative case study approach and

outlined the steps I took to conduct my study. To explore my research questions systematically I conducted interviews with six preschool educators using an “interview guide approach” (Cohen, Manion, et al., 2011, p. 413). I analyzed the interview data as stories of practice. These stories were then used alongside participants’ personal narratives and my own reflective diaries to write the final report all the while conducting ethically sound research and practicing wakefulness and rigour.

As noted in previous chapters, I undertook this investigation into preschool educators’ beliefs and practices with literacy-related *play-based* pedagogies because, as a preschool educator, I was concerned about a perception that preschool educators lack theoretical knowledge about literacy and play. I questioned whether ECEs lack this knowledge and raised the possibility that educators may feel forced to conform to boarder institutional and/or social pressures, such as pressures to homogenize curriculum. In the next chapter I present the interpretive stories of practice constructed from the transcripts followed by comments from my reflective diary. My goal was to highlight preschool educators’ ideas about early childhood literacy and the ways they view play, but the stories also reveal tensions and contradictions and some confusion about current curriculum changes in the larger institutional landscapes of early childhood education. The next two chapters examine and discuss these stories.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Stories of Practice

#### 4.1 Overview

In this chapter I present a set of stories created from transcripts of the interviews with my participants. As stated in previous chapters, the study explored six preschool educators' *funds of knowledge* about print-related *play-based* pedagogies. To prepare the chapter, I deconstructed and reconstructed participants' storied accounts of their experiences with play pedagogies. I examined the transcripts through several lenses: narrative processes, language, context and moments. I created an interpretive story from each transcript working collaboratively with participants during member checks. The stories were augmented by selected field notes from my reflective diary.

Each interpretive story begins with an Orientation. Following an approach employed by McCormack (2004), I use the Orientation as a means to highlight the ways in which the participants and I entered into each other's space. Each Orientation also relates interactions between us that occurred before the interviews took place. Each interpretive story ends with an Epilogue that aims to sum up the interpretation. Finally I add a Coda to bring each story to a close. The visual features of each story are also borrowed from an approach laid out by McCormack. As did McCormack, I quote the participants' words in bold and italic font. I added to the stories using the content retrieved from the interviews and have presented my additions in Times New Roman font. The additions were made in order to construct stories from the story fragments provided by participants.



## 4.2 Interpretive Story #1: Penny Doesn't Like *Play-Based* Learning Because . . .

Orientation: I arrive at Penny's workplace, coffees in hand. Penny greets me. I hand her a coffee. She thanks me. I begin setting up the recording device. We sit down facing each other. The children are asleep. Penny states that she feels nervous. I assure her that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. When she's ready, I press record and Penny begins by describing her program.

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The school day starts at 9:00 A.M. But the children usually don't arrive until 9:15 A.M. Penny tells me that she stays in the front of the childcare centre while children arrive to school. When children arrive, they do fun activities like colour, play with trains, since they have a big train set in the front. At 9:15 A.M. the children sit in a circle for French class. French lasts for a half hour. Then between 9:45 A.M – 10:30 A.M they start the literacy program. The literacy program amalgamates arts/crafts, tabletop toys and sorting games because she says that these types of activities can "kind of" be seen as literacy too . . .

Penny provides examples of how she uses literacy and play in her teaching practices. She begins by describing a game where her students have to match tree leaves with the colours written on a laminated board. She says:

*It's a game, right? They have to sort by colour. They also play with this counting game. I'm trying to teach them how to count. I got the idea from Pinterest. So what they do for this game is, they put pompoms in the holes and then they have to count them. But the older children, I make them do patterns. I guess that's literacy too, right?*

Penny seeks confirmation from me, and then continues to describe her program.

Penny's literacy program currently integrates a number of things. She says that she gives the children weekly letters. They then choose the letters and write them in their literacy booklets. Every week she introduces a new letter. They pick words that start with that letter. Penny usually asks them something like, what starts with D? They tend to look around the room for ideas. For example, there is a Dora book in the room so they might say "Dora starts with the letter D;" or if the calendar says December they may use that word. She writes the words down in their booklets and they are to trace each word; or if they can write it down themselves she says that's okay too. She says that this week they have been learning about Thanksgiving. They try and tie in literacy within the *theme-based* activities, like reading about Thanksgiving or drawing a picture of things related to Thanksgiving. She explains that once they finish with this part of the literacy program, students can do the other activities/games. They can choose whatever they want from the shelf. Penny said that during the school day they also have time to go outside for free playtime. This happens twice a day if the weather permits. If the weather doesn't permit than the children either play in the classroom or in the gym.

In response to my question about conflicting beliefs, Penny begins to express her dilemma with pre-service teachers. She experiences some conflicting opinions and viewpoints with pre-service teachers. She says:

*Like the pre-cut stuff, my students (pre-service ECEs) are all telling me that you shouldn't be pre-cutting anything. I say well "that's how I do it." She's like, if my teacher comes and she sees that you're pre-cutting, she's going to get mad. I'm like well "She's not here to watch me."*

Penny begins to express her personal opinion about *theme based* vs. *play-based* curriculum. Although she prefers one to the other, she battles between the two within her practice.

*I just feel that pre-cut material makes for better art and parents appreciate it. I just . . . I don't know. Like that last one (points to a child's art), the parents are going to think "what the heck did he make?" But like my other student, she made the whole thing, right? Because she's older and she's more creative like that. So she was able to create something herself without pre-cut material. But some of the kids just didn't know, like another student of mine, he just didn't know what to do. He was just staring at the stuff and you had to tell him what to do because he is so used to it.*

*I like themes and pre-cut material better because you have something to work with. I don't like play-based learning because it's . . . I don't know. It doesn't seem creative . . . It's not . . . I don't know. I only like it when they do craft like this when they can make their own design . . . stuff like that and painting . . . but otherwise . . . I don't believe in just letting them do whatever they want . . . It just seems like they are not learning anything, unless that kid is saying like "this is a house." Like that one kid over there, he was saying "this is a house and this is me and I'm jumping" and like he had a whole story to go with it, right? That's literacy too . . . I guess. I guess so . . .*

Penny's voice trails off as she ponders about the meaning of literacy. But the silence didn't last long. She states:

*Telling them that this is what we are doing and then they do it. I don't know how else to explain that, like telling them today we are going to be doing this letter and then . . . doing it, otherwise they don't do what you are asking.*

*I do ask them what they are doing, like today they were doing those (points at the crafts hung up on the window) and it was all loose parts right? So . . . I would talk to them: "what are you making," "what are you going to do next," "what's your favourite shape," stuff like that- open-ended questions.*

Penny shifts back to her battle between *play-based* / *theme-based* curriculum.

*The morning is so structured; there is no time for play. The only time they play is outside. They have one hour to do whatever they want. There are cars and they do*

*racing and whatever they want to do outside. At times I can see the value in play-based learning, like I've seen them go and read a book, like one of my previous students, she always used to do that. She would read the book to herself and if she needed help, she would ask. Another previous student of mine would practice reading at home, mom said, and she just took it all in. She would do it everywhere. When she would draw pictures, she would write her name.*

*But these groups of kids are not interested in books or writing their names, like one of my current students finally learned how to write his name and he has been my student for three years now. But when he does it, he can't concentrate. He'll do it for maybe three times and it's done. He wants to do something else. My current students take the books and make them into cars, like the boys they just take the books and just start driving them. They are not interested in reading them. They don't flip the pages or anything, unless you . . . like my students are sitting down and reading it during quiet time; or there is a teacher that reads it to them, then they are interested in it. Maybe I just need new books.*

*I believe that it all depends on the group of kids and their interests. But like I said, I don't really like the play-based curriculum. I don't think that it can support children's print literacy all the time; maybe like 20% of the time. Children require some instruction too. But I do find that when I label the toy bins or toys, it does help their literacy development because they are constantly using those toys and seeing the words associated to each bin of toys. In this way, indirect literacy facilitation works because they're interested in it. Personally, I want to start taking pictures and like put them beside the bins so that they can associate the words with the picture and object. I used to have it before but some of them were like falling off so now some of them don't have. Also, the owner comes and just takes everything out and then when she leaves again I just have to redo it.*

Later I learn that it's no wonder Penny battles between *play-based* and *theme-based* curriculum. She is in constant struggle with her boss and the overall structure of her program. Her efforts to facilitate *play-based* pedagogies are continually overthrown.

Coda: The phone rings. Penny apologizes for the interruption. The conversation comes to a halt. She answers the phone. I look down at my list of potential interview questions. I realize the interview can come to a close. I stop recording.

Epilogue: For Penny, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning are based on her academic and professional experience. Penny's ECE training focused on the *theme-based* approach to curriculum planning. The childcare centre she works for employs *theme-based* curriculum. Penny's beliefs are at the heart of her practice. They inform what she does and how she does it.

From reflective journal: I took a tally of the narrative styles participant's used during the interviews. As previously mentioned in Chapter three, these narrative styles are: argumentation, theorizing, description and augmentation. As outlined in Chapter three,

McCormack (2004) explains that the term argumentation refers to an abstract element that may not come from a story already told but rather from an outside story; the term theorizing refers to when “storyteller may become reflective, trying to work out ‘why?’, attempting to theorize their experience” (p. 224); the term description refers to the details said about “particular people, places, or things” (p. 224); and the term augmentation refers to the added “information to stories already told as the conversation stimulates recollection of additional story pieces” (p. 224).

The tally helped inform each interpretive story and helped me present the information provided during their interviews as accurately as possible by incorporating a similar style in the interpretive story. Penny employed description three times, argumentation four times, and theorizing four times; and one story with clear boundaries of a beginning, middle and end. This tally helped illustrate a level of confidence she may have been feeling about particular ideas, such as literacy and play. Theorizing, for example, suggested to me that she was processing ideas and had not yet come to a conclusion about these ideas.

I tried to draw attention to what remained unsaid in the story. Penny’s sentences would sometimes fade away before the idea was completed. She would pause or hesitate as she pondered about key concepts, such as *literacy* or *play*. These moments suggest a level of uncertainty. I marked these moments of uncertainty using dotted lines and spaces within the interpretive story. The speed and delivery of the information provided was slow and low in volume with little to no inflection or emotion. This may be, in part, due to the fact that our interview took place during the time her students were asleep. But it may also be due to a level of uncertainty about how to respond to my questions. She often asked questions during our interview to seek approval for her responses to my questions, such as stating her opinion and then asking me if she was correct.

Penny told me that although she understands, respects and even practices some pedagogical approaches associated with *emergent* curriculum, she does not fully put *emergent* curriculum into practice because, she believes it is only effective 20% of the time. She actively practices *theme-based* planning, but it would appear that she equivocates about the benefits of both pedagogical approaches.

### **4.3 Interpretive Story #2: Steph There Is Much More to Do than Jolly Phonics™**

Orientation: Rushing into the Starbucks coffee shop, coffee mug in hand, Steph approaches the table where I am sitting. She apologizes for being late and about the way she looks, explaining that she had a busy day at work because she recently got promoted to team leader. She takes a seat. I offer to buy her something to eat or drink before we begin the interview. She kindly declines my offer. I begin recording. She begins by telling me about her literacy program.

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Steph tells me that there are two working ECEs in the classroom, one who is the Montessori teacher and the other who is the *Core Knowledge* teacher. She describes *Core Knowledge* as an approach to teaching that expands on Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding. She teaches two groups of children and she's the *Core Knowledge* teacher for both groups. The *Montessori* approach used at her centre encourages literacy-based learning through the following types of independent activities: sandpaper lettering, the use of various chalkboard and play dough lettering activities and etc. The *Core Knowledge* approach used at her centre encourages children to learn literacy through song, rhymes, poems and group games. Book themes and Jolly Phonics™ are also two aspects of her literacy program.

She then describes a wide range of learning opportunities and materials she uses to facilitate children's literacy development that targets various types of learners. She states:

*Uh, we have letter lacing, um, lower case and upper case. We have magnetic letters. We have those phonics tools, they love the magnetic ones so they have the phonics magnetic picture things that they can put on the easel with magnetic thingys. We have a white board with markers. We have markers, pencil crayons, crayons. We have the worksheets that I always tell people that they're free to use or not. Um, we have play dough once a week, at least, so that they can mold better. They can mold things. Uh, we also have felt letters and a chalkboard. We have lots of books that some kids just like to choose that activity during playtime, like they may just sit with a book and read. Uh, we have books at every single centre too; science centre, math centre to support what they're learning. Um, what else? What else? . . . In the computer room they play phonics games and sight word games, um . . . .*

Steph continues to ponder on a few more examples of the kinds of activities that help support children's print literacy and comes up with a few more examples.

*And while they play they're actually saying the letter or the sound and a lot of them like putting them in o-o-order and some of them like building words with it, like if I had a sight word card, like flash cards, just in a box, they'll take it out and they'll try, like the SKs will try to actually build words with it.*

Steph explains that in the art centre, she encourages children to choose activities at their own will. She provides a lot of learning opportunities that they can choose from; like they can choose to play with the toys from the shelves, word games, or with the various paper work activities that she prepares in advance. She says she finds that her students really like the word games. She says that they'll often ask, "what's that word?" She also says that she labels the toys with a picture to help enhance their ability to read. But of course, there are the odd few toys without a label. She says that there are so many different kinds of play activities that involve print literacy that she does at her centre.

Soon after providing an extensive list of print related activities, Steph begins to express her recent struggle to convince a fellow ECE that there is much more to do than just Jolly Phonics™. She states:

*Recently I've experienced some difficulty with trying to get one member of my staff to see all the different things she can do to improve her literacy teachings. We're supposed to do Core Knowledge for an hour and she always finishes in half an hour and then do free play and then I'm like "there's much more to do than Jolly Phonics.™" Like there is extensions to storybooks, you don't just read it and then "Yeah, okay that's it," right? Like for example if you're doing, what's a good book? The Little Red Hen, let's just say. So what you can do is, you can have a flannel board right? To tell or retell the story or help the children retell the story. And you can also do songs that go with it. I printed the lyrics, uh, for them and they follow it along. Like some like following, in SK especially, they like following along. And there was an activity where they actually drew the little red hen. So, like before that we talked about "oh like what should we draw on the little red hen" and their like "Oh a beak . . . and feet." They actually need that guidance before drawing the hen themselves or else it'll be just one blob. Um, so there's the art piece in that book. And we also made these little band thingys and had a picture of whoever they were and they acted it out. That's the drama part. So, there's just a lot of different activities that you can do with them after reading the book. And like, even reading the book, you can do lots of things, if it's just reading. You can ask different questions, maybe the very first time you're asking well "what do you think this book is about?" talk about the author, the side of the book, or maybe later on after you read the book, the next day you can talk about "what did you think of the story?" "how do you think, changing the ending," writing a new ending, having the children read along to some parts with you, cuz some are repetitive. No said the dog. Not I said the, you know? So there's a lot of different things you can do, or rhyming words, or . . . so many things . . . because anything print related, they actually take an interest in it.*

*For example they just really like writing, like recently we started writing the teacher's shifts down on the white, big white board that we write to parents and they wanted to write, like draw me a card and like they were looking at the board and writing my name on it. So, they use everything in the classroom, like they look at everything. They are very observant and anything print related they actually take an interest in it. I think it's their developmental level . . .*

Steph doesn't finish her thought, but soon after she expresses her view regarding developmentally appropriate pedagogy. She states:

*It makes a difference on their developmental level; for example, I have a student teacher and, uh, he is actually going to implement a dramatic activity. It hasn't happened yet but, he was giving me an idea about how he wants to make the drama room into a restaurant. And he's like "oh like I had made the menu" and so forth, so forth and then I'm like "it makes a difference on which group you're doing it with. Like SKs they probably would like it more if they made their own menus, because they can spell and they can write, they can draw their own pictures. If it's JKs then probably just picture and a number of, a number as in the price," so in that way they're gonna incorporate . . .*

Steph hesitates. Had she finished her thought I think she would probably have said that this is an example of how ECEs can incorporate literacy for children at different developmental levels.

She explains that another way to incorporate literacy in this dramatic play activity is by writing signs for the restaurant. She doesn't finish her thought because she wanted to add in details about a previously told story. She remembered that her pre-service teacher was going to read a book about food before he implemented the dramatic play activity. She explains that all his learning opportunities are supposed to be accompanied with a book or something literacy related before the activity takes place. She says that she remembers doing something like that when she was a pre-service ECE. She then segues back into on the topic of developmental levels. She states:

*For example at our centre the preschoolers don't really focus on the printing part. They focus on Jolly Phonics™ too, but they focus on the sounds and the singing, whereas when they move up to JK and they start tracing. But even some of my JKs are not ready for that yet. They are still on the mark making stage. I think normally they speak first because they start speaking when they're an infant. I think they both start together (print and oral language), but oral first . . . because without the oral part it's kinda hard to teach them how . . . Like they don't know what they're writing . . . Like if they can't . . . you know what I mean?*

Steph struggles to find the right words to explain her thoughts. She states that it would be difficult to teach a child print literacy if the child has yet to begin developing their oral language skills. She then goes on to acknowledge the ongoing debate about how to teach print literacy to early learners.

*Personally, I can see that there could be a lot of conflict regarding how to teach print literacy, like people would have conflicts with like when to start printing or how to print or how to teach printing cuz it's very . . . there's a lot of different ways.*

*Like, I can see that there would be a lot of conflicting things because I just went to, I don't know if you heard this, but it's called handwriting without tears. We just went to a really good workshop. We used to do that at our centre and then that program got phased out for some reason. But we were talking about how some programs introduce lower case alphabets first, some introduce upper case first, some introduce the sound first, some introduce the letter first and like it's just a whole . . . thing.*

*And we're so used to the Jolly Phonics™ program right now and if a teacher comes in and says "no they have to learn the names first" then yeah, there will be that conflict right there, right?*

Steph concludes by commenting on working for someone else.

She explains how all four of the childcare centres do the same thing and that if she ever wanted to change the way they do things, she can't really argue.

*This is what we do here.*

She explains how there are expectations from the childcare as well as expectations from parents.

*If you don't like it then . . . you know what I mean? You can't really change it . . . you know?*

She admits that the expectations are a bit high these days. Considering the amount of money parents pay for childcare, she said that it's understandable. Steph is expected to help her students practice for grade one entrance assessments and/or interviews; update parents via email on any changes in their child's routine or behaviour; and provide homework and activities to enhance children's print literacy skills. She explains that the expectations regarding her literacy teachings are high. Before, her SKs didn't get homework, but now they've added the sight word program called Ricky Raccoon Sight Words™ and also the reading program, called Reading A to Z™ that the parents are responsible for. She says that she provides a lot of different activities that help them practice a word, like how to read by tracing or circling; or colouring. She does sight word games with them to reinforce what they are learning and to encourage them to do worksheets at home. She also says that she speaks with parents regularly to update one another on the child's progress. She says she needs to know what they are doing at home. Parents want to know what they are doing at school. She also stated that parents seem happy with this type of program and she says she must do what makes the parents happy.

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Coda: The interview ends but our conversation continues. We trail off into a different topic of conversation. She begins to ask me questions. I stop recording.

Epilogue: For Steph, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning are put to practice in her workplace. Although she works at a childcare centre that employs two different philosophies: *Core Knowledge* and *Montessori*, she nevertheless implements *play-based* teachings within the affordances of her practice.

From reflective journal: The tally results of the narrative styles Steph used during her interview showed that she used description eight times; argumentation seventeen times; augmentation one time; theorizing seven times; and told stories that had clear boundaries of the beginning, middle and end four times. This tally illustrated a high ratio of argumentation compared to the other narrative styles she used. Although the tally showed that Steph is currently in the process of theorizing key concepts, such as literacy and play, the high percentage of argumentation helped show me Steph's passion toward her current pedagogical approach and how she has infused her current beliefs and practices with a seemingly equal amount of description and theorization. The fairly equal amount of description and theorization made me wonder whether Steph's stories of practice were that of cover stories. Her stories of practice showed Steph's beliefs are at the heart of her practice, however the fair amount of theorizing may throw this out of question.



There were many hesitations during the interview. Often the goal seemed to be to ensure that she presents her words accurately or to clarify what my expectations were as the researcher of this project. One time she had an unfinished thought because she wanted to add more information about a previously told story. She also had long pauses or moments of silence when thinking of the next thing to say or when elaborating on an answer to a specific question. These moments were marked with dotted lines and spacing within her interpretive story. The speed, volume and delivery of the information provided were moderate with little inflection or emotion and her responses to my questions were straight to the point. This may be, in part, due to the fact that she may have been in a rush to finish the interview and go home after a long workday.

Steph often asked questions during our interview, mostly to inquire about my personal positioning in regards to *play-based* curricular approaches. I was hesitant to respond because I was worried that my response was going to skew her responses to my interview questions. But, I responded anyway and told her that although I see the value in play and have put it to practice, I am not for nor against *play-based* pedagogies. I also told her that it was not my objective to put more value in one pedagogical approach over the other. I told her I simply wanted to explore ECEs' ideas and values in regards to play and literacy-related pedagogies in order to address a concern I had about a perceived notion that ECEs' may lack the theoretical knowledge to effectively support their practice. Although my response may have altered her responses to the following interview questions, I tried to take on a non-judgmental stance.

Steph positioned herself in a way to express that although she understands, respects and even practices *play-based* styles of teaching, she can also see the benefits of incorporating other methods, such as *Montessori* and *Core Knowledge*. For Steph, it would appear that she views *play-based* pedagogy as yet another overarching approach such as *Montessori* and *Core Knowledge*.

#### **4.4 Interpretive Story #3: Nina These Kinds of Games Give Kids More Opportunity to Learn while Enjoying Playing**

Orientation: I arrive at Nina's workplace. She greets me and says she'll be right with me once she ties up some loose ends. Once she's ready she approaches the table that I set up for the interview and sits directly in front of me. She apologizes for the delay. We begin our interview. "It's recording?" she asks. "Yes, it's recording but just pretend it's not here" I say. Nina begins by stating her disapproval for *theme-based* curriculum; a curriculum her centre puts to practice in the preschool and toddler room. I ask Nina about her thoughts on how play supports print literacy. With confidence, Nina states:

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*There are so many games that children can play with while enhancing their print literacy skills, like by counting, by putting the cups and asking them at that age to count the cups and even doing the bingo, recognizing the numbers. There is so many, even outside. They can do so many things, with counting and letters.*

She recalls a few of her work experiences with *play-based* learning.

*I have seen when kids are interested in playing with those alphabet letters, like those puzzles especially the younger age group when I did my placement. And like uh, they have this uh, cut out animals that it's in a shape of animals in puzzles and it's also alphabets. So, when they are doing L, they are finding the spot where the L goes and they also see the picture of the Lions so, uh "oh I found a; L is for Lion," which I really like these kind of things. And I remember I built my own puzzle also, with the alphabets. And uh, I did like a . . . it was kind of like a fishing game, actually. Yeah, it was a fishing game. I think I gave it to one of the staff here. I had different colour of fishes. I laminated them. I had numbers and letters on them. So while they were playing, even the school agers, they enjoy doing it. While they were playing with that, I had the fishing rod, I put the magnets, I put the clips on the fishes. And they were catching the fish. Like I was timing them. They had to catch as many as fishes as they could, but they also had to get to A to Z like how many can you get or from numbers? So, when they were playing, even the rest of the kids who were not playing but they were participating. They were counting. They were encouraging. You know, they were screaming for them. They were saying "yeah, yeah! Get number 6, get number 7!" So, I think uh . . . I really enjoy these kind of games. It gives the kids more opportunity to learn, at the same time that they enjoy playing. And other kind of games that you just buy it and they may just play with it one time and put it away. They lose the pieces and it's just garbage. But like the game I made it's more meaningful to them. They remember it more.*

*One of the things that I really enjoy doing with the kids is like giving them a book or reading the book to them and asking them to play this book, like a drama. My daughter really enjoys it, by the way. So we did, actually, the paper bag princess, last month on a PA day with my school age kids with the JK and SKs. They didn't have to read the same things, but we read the book and they made their own words. So, in my opinion it's really good if the kids uh, learn everything through play, because that opens . . . opens their mind and it keeps them busy, like thinking about it. You know, realizing that okay "what should I do next? How should I put next." But also, I think one of the disadvantages can be like something you see the kids get interested on only one thing and doesn't want to go and experience more or do other stuff. And uh, I think when the kids are learning through play, even if they are not learning it properly, if it's wrong, we should let them be because by the time goes by, they will learn the right way. I don't like correcting them at that age, because then they might be confused so they have to experience it themselves. And if you are consistently correcting them they might lose interest.*

*I really like play-based learning. It depends on the kids, because I believe kids learn through play. It doesn't matter how many times you read something to them through paper, through book, it has to be visualized for them, like even you know, most of the books for the kids at preschool age group, they read it, if it doesn't have any pictures, they are not interested. They are looking at the walls, at the ceiling, they are not paying*

*attention, they are falling asleep. But if the book has pictures, especially if you're showing them, they get deep into it. They imagine, like they put themselves as the characters of that book, "oh I am that hero that saved the dragon" or something, you know? I believe that's play-based.*

*Actually, last year at summer time this was also one of our trips where I took the kids from here to Loblaw's. We went shopping together. My JK/SK group of older kids, we went shopping and like even if like we were not exactly buying it, we were learning how to pick the stuff and where is everything. What's it called? So they learned so much on that day. For example, with my daughter we go grocery shopping and we do it together, like she looks at the price "oh how much is this, we talk about it and I say you pick four apples and she counts the apples and puts four apples and I say "okay lets go get, for example, a red apple." Since she was a lot younger we always did this. This is one of the fun things that she enjoys doing it. So she fills up the grocery, like she buys everything. She looks at the price, she reads it and I think that is really the best thing parents, no matter how busy they are, because this can be part of a game, but at the same time it really uh helps the kid to learn more and more everyday. For their future, like okay this is how I go for grocery shopping or like this is the list of things we need to buy. Now she can actually . . . she's in grade one, she can write. But when she was a little younger she couldn't write, I was asking her to draw. Draw the pictures, so she was drawing pears, bananas and there was always ice cream no matter what. She always had to draw ice cream.*

In response to my inquiry about Nina's program planning, she states:

*The program planning that we do, of course everyday it is in the program that they arrive at school and they eat snack, they do homework then they do some sports and, you know, arts and crafts and whatever but I actually don't do the program planning in advance. I always have it blank. For example, today or this week they were interested in talking about nature, like I put the nature and I start the project. We talk about nature, we discuss about it. You know, what you see in nature, like what can you . . . what is your experience, what have you experienced with nature, which...what do you like about it? How can we . . . our environment? How can we . . . then we continue and we talk about planting. By planting we can help nature. By doing a lot of things that kids always come up with the great ideas and I fill in like okay, nature project. I don't have to name it specifically, like what we did today exactly, we did this, we built this, we plant or whatever. Sometimes, this can take up the whole month or if after one week they lose interest, like they go to something else, I just cut it right there because I never agreed with forcing children what they have to do. So this kind of program planning is mostly for the school agers. With that, I can implement my own projects but with the younger group, unfortunately, no they have to follow the theme.*

Nina states her opinion with confidence.

*I don't agree with the theme-based program. I don't like it. I think that, if we know the kids and when we are observing them everyday, we have to base our curriculum on*

*what the kids are interested in and what they are enjoying. Because if we give them more opportunity, like more things, more materials, like mostly it shouldn't be teacher based like just copying. Like okay, this is what we have to do and we are going to do it today because it's Halloween- no! I think kids have to build their own knowledge by practicing and trying. That's how I would like to implement if one day I have my own childcare or if I could, I would do that. I like projects. It doesn't matter if the kids are toddlers, preschoolers. I like to do project approach from any age because, I believe if a child is coming and talking to you about like...snow today, and then okay, he is interested in that and he is talking about the snow. I'd have to do something to introduce him to snow, like talk about it, like show him some experiences. And mostly, I like hands on, like even if I have to find books about snow and bring real snow and if it's summer, then we can build the snow. Where does snow come from? What colour is it? Like all these experiments, I like mostly hands on kind of activities. Like okay, just talking about it and at the same time, as I said, you can have books and talk about it but unfortunately, we are still old fashioned and they are doing theme-based and it's not my choice.*

*I'm not happy with what's going on because I wish I could change everything. But unfortunately, we can't because that's what we have to follow. I don't like when the teachers are cutting and preparing everything for them. Everyone's looks the same. You could not recognize which kid did what. If it doesn't look like a turkey then it doesn't look like a turkey. It doesn't matter, you know? If the kid, you know, this is how he sees the turkey as just a circle; it's fine. But that's unfortunately what they are doing. And they are following the rules here so . . . .*

She shrugs.

*It's very difficult. Sometimes, I just say, you know what? Because they are younger, with the toddlers and preschoolers, I just let them do. But when I see their work, through our tour for example, I put myself as that child's parent and I say, "okay as a parent, I can see that my child didn't cut this. As a parent, I can see that my child didn't paint this" So it's . . . sometimes I get angry. I get mad. I get frustrated. And um . . . I even get sad but the thing is that, I try I try I try everyday, but it's just . . . I think . . . uh . . . I have to say . . . maybe the owner graduated a long time ago, maybe she is old fashioned that she has to do that or, um . . . I don't know honestly, like I get frustrated. But, slowly, slowly, because I am very stubborn, if I want, if I put my mind to something, I will do it.*

*One of the things that they first had here was the Montessori program. Thank god I eliminated that because it was like a boot camp for preschoolers. I am completely against Montessori. I'm sorry, but I respect it but it's not something I see myself working with in the future. So, I'm hoping with some effort I can change the current program to more play-based.*

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Coda: Nina expresses that “she’d have more to say” without the recording device. I stop recording, which concludes the interview but our conversation continues. We share a few more stories and then part ways.

Epilogue: For Nina, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning roots from her personal and academic experiences. Despite being raised in a strict environment with strict teaching principles, she currently adopts a more mindful approach to teaching. She uses *play-based* teaching principles in unique and tangible ways for her students. In the face of an all *theme-based* approach to teaching and learning, Nina attempts to overthrow the centre’s current curricular approach in order to align the centre’s approach with her beliefs and practice.

From reflective journal: The tally results regarding the narrative styles Nina used during our interview showed that she used description three times; argumentation three times; did not use augmentation; used theorizing once; told four stories that had clear boundaries of a beginning, middle and end. This tally helped highlight Nina’s high level of confidence, which is reflected in the low ratio of theorization and the fairly equal ratio of description, argumentation and stories provided during the interview. The only time Nina showed signs of theorizing was when I asked her questions about her school experience as a child and how it compared to today’s education system. She was theorizing the advantages and disadvantages of these very different worlds.

There were barely any hesitations throughout Nina’s interview. Her level of certainty was consistent even though there were moments of struggle when expressing her efforts to change the curricular approaches at her centre to a more *emergent* approach. The speed, volume and delivery of responses provided were moderate. She showed a lot of inflection and emotion in her responses, which further reinforced the idea that Nina was very confident and passionate about her responses.

Nina positioned herself in such a way to express that although her childcare adopts *theme-based* curriculum, she tries really hard to incorporate the *play-based* or the project approach- an approach that aligns more with her personal beliefs.

#### **4.5 Interpretive Story #4: Erica It's Always Adapting to Your Environment, Adapting to Your Group, Not Always Doing Things in the Same Way and Really Embracing the Children in Your Environment and Scaffolding on Their Learning**

Orientation: I approach Erica’s office; her colleague informs me that Erica is covering a break. These are the only times Erica is able to fit classroom time into her work schedule. I wait patiently upon Erica’s arrival. Once she arrives, we step into the resource room. I set up the recording device and we begin the interview.

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*So, play-based learning has been bred into me since the beginning of . . . well, when I went to school, though I went thirty three years ago. I graduated from Fanshawe College in London in 1980. It was more a curriculum-based focus at that time. But when I came out into the field and coming to this centre when Paula was the supervisor for 33 years, she was very much play-based and learning through play and not through structure. So, I had to step back, reflect and evaluate. So, coming from training that was more curriculum-based to now going to play-based, I see that there are advantages of pulling little bits and pieces of everything together.*

*In our centre we say that we have adapted to the emergent curriculum, but we haven't adapted to one way of doing it and so there is like High Scope, Reggio Emilio. We've always been known and have chosen to take little bits and pieces from different things and make it fit us, instead of us trying to fit a mold. So that is why we design our own curriculum sheet and that is why we now are looking at it and reevaluating it.*

*Our program also acknowledges that the environment is an additional educator and that children can also learn through many different types of mediums. For instance: magazines, books, picture books, wordbooks, the record and they will go through them. You know, we'll go through and pick the positive things, like the weather so they can read the weather symbol, what is the local page, what is the advertising page, so we tend to stay away from the negative part of the news. But having telephone books out, and having keyboards so that they are looking at letters. Before, we used to underestimate what children can do. And now we are trying to empower them by giving them these different types of mediums.*

*One of the mediums we use is the KW Record and each of the classrooms get a copy of the Record. And so, the children again will sit down with the record and look and they can recognize that it says "the Record" on it. They can recognize that in print. An example of that is a couple years ago a family was in Swiss Chalet having dinner and a Record blimp was in the sky and the child who was 2 and a half looked out the window and says to her parents: that says "the Record." And they were blown away. We also post a lot of pictures with words printed below; we do projects- various types of books where they might just staple some papers together with some construction paper at the top to make the cover and the children will write their own stories; we do something called feature author. So featured author, and again we start that in the toddler, it is an author that we focus on for a month at a time. We try to focus on Canadian authors, but Eric Carle is a favourite. And so those books will be out for the whole month and they talk about the featured author, they talk about getting information about that author, they talk about what an author does, what an illustrator does. And then by Kindergarten they are starting to print. In the beginning of the year they dictate stories and some in the preschool but by the end of the year they are printing their own stories in their own words. For a couple of years they were really into Jillian Jigs with millions of pigs. So they would write their own story. They then would do a project where they would make stuffed pigs out of stocking. So at the beginning of the year and even with the younger children now, they'll do a painting and they'll do a narrative of what it is. They will write it beside it when they are doing*

*their books. They will tell you what they are drawing with as well as what they are printing on. And as the year progresses they will start writing more on their own. By the end of the year they will be writing two or three sentences on each page.*

*So again, literacy just doesn't happen inside, it happens outside as well. We want to build on that more. We had rocks and we had put letters on the rocks, so that they could explore with letters, another way of recognizing letters, from patterns and the beginning of making words and we are looking at labeling more things outside and getting plaques. At one time we were really better at labeling things and then we kind of shifted and we have been talking about that, how we need to shift back to labeling more, like the chair and write the word chair on it and table . . . So some rooms have that more than others and I think we need to look at making the shift back to that again. We also take different activities out. And so, we make different labels for things like tree and bark and different things so it's visual and, and, and, and, you know, all the senses are, are being utilized.*

Erica continues to provide an extensive list of *play-based* activities that help support children's print literacy.

*When we started making this change into the emergent curriculum, one day they brought in this whole bucket of twigs and they had stones and different things. They put that with the play dough. They had to open up a second play dough, because of the three D- dimension and it's not just rolling and cutting and they can't lift it and the staff would have to scrape it up. So, giving them tools like a stick that allows them to be creative on their own. Again, there is all the pre-prewriting and motion happening for developing their prewriting skills. Indoors we have other sensory activities too, like sand and water play. But literacy is presented in many different ways. Through items provided at the play dough table or water table (i.e., fishing game where the fish have letters of the alphabet on them and etc). Again, just having them trace with their finger and make indentations in the play dough. You have stencils and different things that help. So, print that can be done in many different ways. The art centre is an easy one. We have many different mediums. We have stamps. We have stencils. We have collage where we can try and pull out different methods to do. And often it's just a mixture of different letters all over the page. But again, that's all the beginning. That's all pre, pre-reading and pre-writing skills. I think sometimes we underestimate the importance of just providing a variety of activities. People may say, "oh no they won't understand" but they probably might. It's our responsibility to provide material for children to make designs. And again, we believe that designs are pre-literacy and it's not just all the formations of the letters. You need to have the comfort ability and that fluidity in making different markings. And you'll see that on their paintings and we are very big on the easel and having different things up. And we have words up and different designs up and providing large pieces of paper. That's one thing that our previous supervisor always stated was "do not just give them a small piece of paper to a small toddler, and even if there's just one squiggle on it, that's okay." They need to have room to expand and explore and to be creative and not just on a small piece of paper.*

*So we are constantly looking at our programs, our curriculum and in fact this week we have a meeting where we set up a subcommittee of our staff to look at the curriculum sheet that we have signed. We will evaluate it now that we have used it for one year. What changes do we want to make? Because we have gone from a theme based program to a fully emergent program. We always had emergent pieces in our program, however, when you have a program plan that says "on Tuesday, I'm going to do this and on Wednesday I'm going to do this," you are locked to that because a calendar is sent home and parents are expecting that, and the ministry says "well it says you are going to do this on this day and I don't see that it's ever happened." With emergent it's a little more open. For example sometimes a child comes in with something really cool: "Oh I've found this birds nest and I want to bring it in." So you could sit down with them in a group and talk about that, and the depth of learning that happens is crucial. However, in the past we would have had to cut that to maybe 5 or ten minutes because "I have planned this and this and I have to get this done." So emergent curriculum really allows for more openness. We find the authentic learning that happens with our two-and-a-half-year-olds all the way up to our five-year-olds is ten-fold of what it was before. What I mean by authentic is when they're ready to learn through the observations that have been made of the children throughout the day. We often are talking about similar things like before but just not a week at a time. If one topic in two days loses interest then move on to something else. Something might last for two, three weeks. You may introduce another project at the same time and going on with more than one project at a time and your meeting more and more needs of the children because you are seeing where their developmental needs are. You are going by basing your programs on the observations of the children and deciding. So it's my role as an administrator to be abreast of what is happening in the classrooms, to see, to kind of guide and lead to keep moving forward, with what we are hearing what is happening in our community and in the province. And so I sit on various committees, I go to too many meetings and yet a part of me feels that that is very important to do so because it is critical in keeping us abreast with what's happening and critical in moving us forward.*

But ever since this centre switched from a *theme-based* to *play-based* approach she explains that a few parents say, "Well they are just playing." She says that a few board members were even skeptical of the *emergent* approach. However she explains that their opinion changed very quickly. She states:

*Our program was always play-based or had play-based components to it, but now we are more intentional about it. Before we would send home the calendar that had the little boxes that said, you know, "this day you're doing this, this day you're doing this," and some people like that visual on the fridge; to know that this day is red day. You know, today I need to bring a book in. But then, you know, if they forgot to bring a book in, it's like "Oh dear! I forgot a book." And then they soon begin to understand that, children are invited to bring a book in and it's written over the full week, if you forgot a Monday, it's okay to bring it Tuesday, it's okay to bring it Thursday or roll over to the next week. So we still send calendars home because there is some information that is just a really good way to share it with our families. But we don't say*



*what we are talking about per week. Instead, there will be a paragraph on the bottom saying, "This is what happened last month, and this is where we are planning to go this month." So it's kind of looking back and looking ahead. And so we do it in paragraph form more than in the daily form.*

*After a year of embracing the emergent approach at our centre it's like "Wow, the things that happen." We have 2 and 2-and-a-half-year-olds talking about Vincent Van Gogh. And going home and saying, "that's a sunflower. That is from Vincent Van Gogh"- a 2-and-a-half-year-old! They did a unit on Towers. They were building towers, so the teacher compiled all the different pictures of the towers from all around the world, like the Eifel tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the CN tower and, 2-and-a-half-year-olds were going home and identifying and recognizing the different towers. I'll show you a picture of a puzzle that is 500 pieces that a group of 4-year-olds put together. And years ago we would have never put that puzzle out for children to attempt, thinking that that would frustrate them, that it was too challenging because on the box it says 12 and up. But now when 4-year-olds want to do it, sure let's give it a try. It took them four weeks but 24 4-year-olds put that together and when you see it you'll think, it's not an easy puzzle. It's regular pieces and all very much the same colours. So now, parents and staff who were once skeptical see the value in a program such as this one. But we really do have to educate the families that children are learning through their play and through their environment because there are still some that want that cognitive piece, and they need to see that they are having that cognitive readiness for their school and for their future. And so, you do have to be able to verify how you are implementing those different things: literacy, numeracy and that it's not just play. That's one of the reasons why we've brought back Jolly Phonics™ as a component to our literacy program even though I understand that some school and centres have moved away from that. We won't be doing it as formally with our preschoolers as we did with our older because now, again, this is the first year that we have mixed preschool rooms- 2 and a half to four. We always, in previous years had a two and a half year old room, a 3-year-old room and 4-year-olds. So what you would do with your 4-four year-olds you would do a bit differently than with your 3-year-olds. But one of the staff has worked on the Jolly Phonics program to gear it down to the younger children and we are going to start that probably in November or shortly after. So it's a little formal but not as formal as what we have done in the past. Our entire program is very informal now. You don't see a formal: this is our language and literacy. It's all intertwined and intermingled. With the older children we had worksheets available, but we tended to move away from that somewhat and we no longer do this. We did have some parents ask for the Jolly Phonics™ sheets. We didn't send it home with every child but we did have them readily available, so if a family wanted to do those types of activities at home, they could. But it wasn't something that every child was...or had to do. So we feel that it is important to provide things in our program that are unique to us as well as cater to our families' needs. It's something that we have felt strongly about and was driven in us by our previous supervisor who had been here for 33 years.*

Erica explains how even though about 95% of parents have accepted their program as is, there are always some parents that still say in their evaluation that they would like to see more of the cognitive approach.

*We send an evaluation out once a year, and some will still say: well the cognitive piece. And so, it's our responsibility to provide different activities and mediums and different things to meet all the needs of parents. That's what we have to look at and that's why we are trying to change our curriculum sheet to really showcase. We do so much that we don't showcase to our families well enough. And that is something that we are trying to look at; how can we showcase to our parents what is happening? One of the things that have changed the most is the amount of documentation that we do. We probably take thousands of pictures a year. And so, we have looked at and we have changed where we put our money into and what we spend it on. Not spending it on all our new toys. We look at what is more important and with the emergent we had a shift to loose parts, which is shifting back to when I first came into the field thirty years ago, that you had more open ended material. And so that's why a room with 2-and-a-half and 4-years-old room works because you can have a box of pinecones and stones and pebbles and corks and whatever. And a two-and-a-half year old can just be stacking them on top of each other in a row and a four-year-old could be sorting them and matching them; classifying. So this same bucket of loose parts can meet the needs of all the children. But if you have a toy that is only one way to do it, if you have it out is it age appropriate for the two-and-a-half year old or under challenging for the four-year-old? That would be more of the dilemma than the other way. So that's probably still the one thing that the parents say: are you meeting our cognitive needs because they don't see us have the photocopied worksheets and the photocopied art, you know, it's more open ended. But again the different things that they are learning and when they see the documentation of the pictures of what is actually happening throughout the day, they begin to see the benefits to such a program.*

*Another thing that we do is portfolios on each child. So that's another way to see the progression. And last year was the first year we did it in the entire school and some centres opt to keep the portfolios . . . from the day the child starts and only give it to them when they leave. We have opted to give it to each family every June, so they can see right in that short term what their child has done, how they have progressed throughout the year. So they will have a picture or a piece of paper and have them draw a picture in September and some of the room opt to do that every month so you see the progression. Others opt to just take different art paintings. But again, you can see the progression when my child painted this painting in September and my child painted this painting in June and see the different details and the different things. So this is another tool that assists parents in understanding and seeing the concrete progression from beginning of September over the course of 10 months. And you forget what your child was at, and they think that they should maybe be further but when you see all these steps that they've accomplished that really helps them understand.*

*We also believe that it's beneficial to have some group time so that children do learn how to sit and be focused. It's the educator's responsibility to figure out what is a good amount of time. And, what works one day, might not work the next day. So you have something planned and half way through, you're thinking this is not working; you stop and move on to the next thing. You scrap it; or you try a different approach. The next day you may think "maybe this is a small group activity I do during free play and only have a small group." So it's always adapting to your environment, adapting to your group, not always doing things in the same way and really embracing the children in your environment and scaffolding on their learning. It is crucial. So, do I think there are disadvantages to play? Not at all. I think children learn many, many skills and many, many things and we've learned that we really need to focus more and more on social skills at this age. And build children's self-esteem and confidence and focus less on all the academic things. And if they have the emotional and social foundation and basis all those other things will fall into place. But if they go into public elementary school and they don't have a very good social or emotional foundation, they struggle once they get into those older grades. Social skills are just the key and most important and if you don't have that good foundation for social skills, literacy, numeracy, nothing, you know, it all hinges on that. And the more we research and hear, you know, of other countries and Sweden is an example of how they don't start formal school until 6 or 7. And they are focused on the outdoors and the indoors and it's all on play and the social. And so when they start formal school, they, comparing to Canadian/American, they'll be a little behind. But research has shown that it does not take them long to catch up and then they exceed and then they excel, because they have those, skills. A child needs to know how to problem solve, how to regulate their own body. We have a program called tools for life that teaches them those different things. We started that here and some of the elementary schools have adapted to that. And there are many different types of programs that are all very similar. It's just that, if they don't have that foundation to build their confidence, to engage in conversations, to engage in play, if their imagination isn't built then none of those academic components will fall into place. So we feel that the social piece is crucial. And if the child is struggling there then we look at many different ways to help a child build on that and to gain those strengths. One of the things we have noticed through the emergent curriculum piece and especially outdoors is that children play more cooperatively and collaboratively. And children who have often shied away from taking the leadership role, will do so outdoors. Again, we have embraced that you can do many different things. You know, years ago you always did your math and your literacy had to be done inside and then you went outside to play. And that is so untrue. We have taken nature and brought it inside and we go outside, so we have opened up our schedules to allow for some flexibility so we can stay outside longer so that the children are not missing any components by any means. And that's why I said, we need to do more and I've identified that as one of our goals; to either add more literacy things outside so it builds on their development. If a child is not focusing inside they are not learning or coping. But a child can go outside explore nature and their environment around them- the attention that they can give to a certain activity. And literacy to us is more than print. It is many different things, um... and I think years*

*ago you'd think that literacy is just printing; how you do the A and the B and words. But literacy is the whole language and the social aspect and the print and combining them all together. So providing that type of environment and you see, again, more and more research that we do shows for school how children learn and it goes back to that social aspect, the confidence that they have and they can excel in those areas will give them the tools and give them what they need to focus when they go to elementary school.*

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Coda: Erica looks at the time and realizes we've been talking for over an hour. We wrap up the interview. I stop recording.

Epilogue: For Erica, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning are rooted in her childhood experiences. Learning through play was the approach to teaching when she was a child and this informs her current practice. Despite the fact that her ECE training experience focused on *theme-based* pedagogical practices, her personal beliefs inform her current practice.

From reflective journal: Erica used description ten times; argumentation fourteen times; did not use augmentation or theorizing; and she told five stories that had clear boundaries of a beginning, middle and end. This tally helped highlight Erica's high level of confidence, which is reflected in the low ratio of theorization to augmentation and high ratio of argumentation and description. I inferred that Erica's beliefs are at the heart of her practice for her use of argumentation was very much infused with the descriptions of her practice.

There were hesitations throughout the interview. These moments were marked by dotted lines and spacing. She often hesitated in order to ensure that she presents her words accurately or to think of what she was going to say next. Sometimes her hesitations or pauses were due to the fact that she added something new. She had a lot to say with not enough time to say it. The speed, volume and delivery of responses were low/moderate with some inflection and emotion, which may be due to the fact that she was recovering from pneumonia. It may also denote a level of uncertainty or low confidence in response, which contradicts my early point about the tally suggesting that Erica expressed a high level certainty in her responses.

Erica expressed that although she understands, respects and even practices *play-based* styles of teaching, she can also see the benefits of other methods and uses those methods to see what works best instead of trying to fit a mold.

#### 4.6 Interpretive Story #5: Sarah There is a lot more pressure on kids nowadays; it's like they are only going to grade one, not Harvard

Orientation: After work I meet Sarah at her parents' home. A conversation sparks immediately. We talk about her wedding. Once we're ready to begin the interview, I set up the recording device.

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Sarah begins by describing her literacy program. Her literacy program uses Reading and Writing Without Tears™. She describes this program by saying:

*We try and teach the kids, you know, letter formation. We are starting off in the JK room. We are starting off with letters that are like we do . . . We are starting off with letter C, which is a circle so most kids start off with maybe circles. So we start off with C and O would be our first and then the letter I because it's like the line down so that's for our writing program. For the reading program we evaluate the children because we are not at a play-based centre. We are more of uh . . . an academic curriculum centre, so we do, um, we assess them to see what their reading levels are when they come in and then we send home weekly books that go home with the parents. And they are very basic books, like "I like ice cream" and then its just a little book and then every week they sort of . . . we go with their levels and we go up a level every week and parents read with them on the Friday. They go home Friday and they come back Monday so they sit and they read at home with them. And then when they're reading, we encourage the parents to help the children point to each word so to understand. And Monday when they come back, Monday or Tuesday depending on the day we read with them the book and see how well they did and give a sticker just to keep track. And then, sort of, the levels increase with that.*

*Last year we did a lot of crafts just because the teacher that was in the room last year, she was an Art major so much of her duties were crafts. So at the beginning of the year we had a lot of crafts built into our curriculum but now we find that they're benefiting . . . like the crafts are nice but they are also benefiting from phonics. We are doing phonics sheets so we are kind of trying to . . . instead of having two arts a day, we are trying to do one art and then do an art of free choice. We have markers and pencils and all that out and then we do, instead of doing art in the afternoon, I do phonics with them. So we kind of try to do more of a curriculum, more of an academic approach. And then just cut out, like we understand that art is important but then, them doing their own art is just as valuable as us telling them to do this art... I like the fact that it's academic based because we see a big difference from the kids that started the first day to now. A lot of them couldn't even.*

*There was no letter recognition. They couldn't write their names and now there is letter recognition and they can write their names with the help of their name card. So they can write their names now. Even within the span of a month. They've really come far.*

*As part of our literacy program we also ensure that everything in the room is kind of labeled. And then we . . . So when they go, sort of, in the kitchen it has labels and stuff so they can read. And then we do, we do a lot of singing and stuff with them so kind of . . . I know that's not literacy parse but we do singing and games kind of to have them be sort of encouraged. But our centre is more . . . like there is playtime and then we call them up to the table to do work. So it's like they do get... its not necessarily together but they do have play and then we kind of have things labeled and we have iPads that do help them read with games, or a computer game that helps them find this word and then they match it. So in that sense, that's how we integrate reading and writing and play-based.*

Penny explains that the alphabet is a major component to their literacy program:

*We are more academic curriculum based. We are not really, like you know, we are not really a Montessori system or the Waldorf system. I think it's just . . . it's whatever works. We try to, just see what works and just be consistent. We don't really go by any one theory.*

Sarah continues by stating her opinion about *play-based* curriculum:

*I think with strictly play-based you can't really sit down and have them write their name, you can't really sit down and . . . it just doesn't work out. I personally like the focus on academic learning better because we do, well there is a lot of playtime during our day but then there is the academic portion as well. I find that when they go into grade one it's not as much of a shock to them when they have to sit and be at a table. It gives them the consistency. It gives them the idea that right now we are sitting and we are doing our work. With play-based, I just find that it wouldn't be like that. It just would be kind of like a free for all. They would just do play-based and when they would have to sit at a table in grade one they might not be able to...they might not be used to it, they might not be okay with sitting and learning.*

*If they are going to play, lets say they are going to do a flower shop, they can all kind of, write down the currency or even when I did camp we did a play, like a... like a theater production play and then they made tickets and they made . . . what are those called . . . like advertisements for their parents. Right now they are really big into the kitchen at our centre. So we can do like maybe, a cookbook. They can just pretend that they are making something and we can ask them: what are you going to put into this? Then they can write it down. They are also really big on nature right now. We are at a point where there is leaves falling and there are tons of snails on the playground so maybe we can write a story about the snails. You know, we can write about uh, you know we can do a story about the leaf blowing through the playground and all the things the leaf sees. Therefore we can do that to support children's literacy skills through play. In that sense, yeah it can support their print literacy because . . . it lets them be creative and it lets them write their own story. And in that sense it lets them use written language, and it's not even necessarily that they are writing it correctly. We can say "what is the story?" And they can write it to the best of their ability. And then*

*we can say “Oh” and we can write it properly at the bottom so they can see. They can still see that okay they wrote a story. If they think that the word “this” is spelled in a certain way and they sound it out and to the best of their knowledge if they can write it and we can just say “Oh, no . . . you forgot the “h” or whatever and we can write it and they can recognize that “okay in my head I sound it out and this is what it sounded like” but then look at the bottom and reference and say “okay maybe this is how they spell it.” So they can sort of benefit from both*

Sarah goes back to talk about *play-based* learning:

*Well, I find that people who are in the full day learning think play-based it’s the thing to be, and then they say, “but oh they’re learning they’re playing and kids learn through play.” I’m like “yeah, but they don’t . . . learn when they are sitting down. They say “but you’re constricting them because now they are sitting and they are young and they can’t have the attention span to sit at the table” So in that sense, ya the people that are working in full day kindergarten, they have their kind of idea and we have, like I have mine. But it’s like, “well okay” and we leave it at that.*

Sarah then provides some examples of when she put play to practice:

*I remember when at the centres we would try to . . . when we were doing our placements, we would try to, when we did activities, like I did a flower shop. So then I had, you know, flowers for sale written in, and one dollar, there was different denominations so that was sort of like they had to, not necessarily read but they find what matched, like the dollar bill, this is what it looked like and kind of find. They would try to pay for the flowers and figure out how much it would, like to the best of their knowledge, try to figure out how much it would cost and pay. So that was the only time, I kind of, we’ve done literacy like directly literacy and play-based.*

The moment fills the air up with silence. I take this opportunity to ask Sarah about her childhood experiences at home and at school with print literacy. She responds by saying:

*My parents when they were teaching us, there is a really funny story about like, if I saw the word A I would always jump to like...I couldn’t read and the word donkey in German is Azle so when I would see A I would say “A Azle” but its not even what it says. My sister would point out A and I would say “Azle” and she would say “that’s not the word!” Then they would be like, “okay let’s sound it out”...[laugh] and so in that sense it was about sounding out, not even...well I find that a lot of the kids in our centre, they see M and he’s like “it’s Martin!” “No, it says mat” like for a place mat or something, ‘cos they see the word that’s what they see, they see their letter and they think it’s their name. So I think that in that sense, my parents were always like “okay, let’s sound it out” and they did that. They would do the, the reading with me and the spelling, so it’s the same. You have to sound it out and... but the way we are teaching them it’s like we’re more fun about it, like the reading without tears, writing without tears program. It’s more like “curvy rainbow,” you’re creative and I think that in our generation it wasn’t creative. It was like “two” and you have to read two. It’s more*

*child friendly now. It's more of a game, like "oh you're making a curvy rainbow! Now it has a tail. So it's more game-based.*

*When I went to school in Germany, I actually went to a school that was play-based. Ya, it was very . . . I don't remember . . . but we didn't learn our alphabets. We didn't learn. I remember that I was a horrible cutter and I wasn't allowed to use scissors. I had to use the puncturing. They would even make the holes and I would go like this around and you make a . . . but it was very play-based. And it was kind of like, even though it was in Germany, but it was border lining Waldorf. Every week we would cook something. My parents would bring in pasta and we'd make pasta together. But then we would learn our basics in first, second, third and fourth grade. I know in Germany, in their school system, you'd have the same teacher from first to fourth grade. It doesn't change. Ya, so if you were in my case, I was with a bad teacher. So you don't learn the basics.*

She then comments on the pressures placed on children nowadays. She states:

*I feel that nowadays by the time the kids even get to grade one they already have the basics because we are teaching them reading, writing. Even the SKs, when you look at their work they can write, they can basically read little books. They're very advanced, I find compared to what we were like, when we were . . . I mean in grade one, I couldn't find my A from the B kinda. It wasn't . . . you would learn your basics I found in grade one but now I find in grade one, you already have your basics and you're at a higher level and your not . . . like as an ECE we try to instill in them that, "Okay, this is important now." Even with languages, we never... we were taught English in Germany in grade 4, but now we are trying to teach them French even in nursery. So, it's . . . I find that we are more advanced with them, we have high expectations of them now. When we were little it was like "they will get it." And then . . . and I find that the parents are putting a lot more pressure on their kids now. It's like "they're going to grade one, they aren't going to Harvard." If they don't understand, it's fine. They might not be able to understand yet but by grade one . . . it will click.*

*I find there is more priority on getting them to read and write or getting them into a reading and writing program, have them read and write by the time they get to grade one. I find that a lot of parents are pushing the nursery kids, at a nursery age into learning more advanced material. I also find that parents don't, as much as they value . . . a child doing a craft, kind of like a circle completely unrecognizable to them once stuff goes home that's, you know . . . like we did crafts that were for the letter C we did a caterpillar so we just stuck around circles and like a tag was put on as a C for caterpillar and it's very . . . they appreciate that more because as much as they think "okay we want our children to play" when they go home and they or we have nothing to show for it, even summer camp- they wanted . . . like I made weekly booklets to go home because they would think, "okay so we are just paying money and our child is just playing" – really? Like you are a babysitter at that point. But when stuff goes home like the letter C with pictures that are based on the letter C and stuff there are like "Oh, okay . . . I get it! You are doing something with them" So in that sense, that's*



*why like even summer camp when we were supposed to be relaxing and having fun they preferred stuff to go home. For science week I made experiments with them we would draw pictures based on the experiment and, they would go home and they would say "Oh this was the experiment and this is the interpretation of the picture. I get it." Instead of the picture just going home and then they just say, "oh is this a volcano? Like what is this?" "It's a volcano and the parents would say, "Oh!" So they kind of, parents value when work comes home that's literacy-based because then they feel like "oh, okay they are doing something" As bad as it sounds, "you're not babysitting; you're teaching and my kids are learning."*

*Parents want more and most of them were coming back for the following year so I wanted to like encourage them to . . . the way we set up camp was to... we were trying to give an idea of like this is the bridge between nursery and JK to get them started into the JK. So they are not just sitting dormant with all their . . . they are not just forgetting what they learned. They were building on what they learned from Nursery or SK or whatever and we are adding to it to bridge it, coming over from nursery to JK. So that's what they wanted. I was okay with that because with play-based it's . . . I just found that they just enjoy the structure. Even now they say "Oh can I come to your table?" and they understand that its . . . its . . . this is your day and it's structured.*

Coda: There is another moment of silence. My eyes rest on the paper. The interview comes to a close. I stop recording.

Epilogue: For Sarah, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning manifested during her childhood, which currently informs her practice. Her experience as a student, learning in an all *play-based* environment, seized to prove itself effective. Despite our current culture that idealizes *play-based* pedagogical practices, she challenges such notions by embracing a more academic pedagogical approach. Sarah's personal beliefs are at the heart of her practice.

From reflective journal: The tally results regarding the narrative styles Sarah used during our interview showed that she used description twice; argumentation three times; augmentation once; theorizing four times; and told four stories that had clear boundaries of the beginning, middle and end. This tally helped highlight a level of uncertainty regarding Sarah's responses to interview questions. This level of uncertainty is reflected in the equal distribution of stories, argumentation and theorization present within her interview transcript.

There were hesitations throughout the interview, often to ensure that she presents her words accurately or to stop and rephrase her response. Once she had an unfinished thought because she added in a forgotten detail about a previous told story. She had long pauses or moments of silence when thinking of the next thing to say. Also, Sarah's sentences would fade away without completing the thought. These moments of silence are marked in her interpretive story with dotted lines and spaces. These moments may denote that Sarah may feel a strong level of uncertainty regarding her beliefs, practices

and how they conflict with current official curricular documents, such as the *emergent* curriculum.

Sarah positions herself in a way to express that although she understands, respects and even practices some *emergent* styles of teaching, she sees the benefits of other methods like a more academic approach, which is the approach adopted by her current workplace. I question whether her proclivity towards the academic approach is due to her desire to please parents and or a way to preserve her identity as an effective teacher.

#### 4.7 Interpretive Story #6: Diana *I Think* outside the Box

Orientation: Our meeting took place at a centre with which Diana has a long history: a history as a parent, a childcare advisor who licensed the centre, and as a board-development trainer. She was also instrumental in helping this centre secure and fund its current location. I was running a little late for our interview and apologized for being late. Diana actually appreciated that I was late as it gave her time to catch up with her colleagues. The centre's supervisor set us up in the teacher's lounge for the interview. I set up the recoding device and press record.

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*I started off my career years ago at a childcare in downtown Toronto. And after I said to myself I'll stay there for a year and one day I want to become a supervisor of a childcare. And so I, um, applied for and I got a job as a supervisor setting up a childcare in the heart of Regent Park. I was given a, um, portable- an empty portable- with ten children. No Resources. I had to collect them. Get them, you know, here's a budget. At the time I was attached to a, a community centre, which later we broke away. We became our own corporate entity. So that's when I started first getting into the law; corporate law for not for profits. And when I look back and this is years ago when Art Eggleton was Mayor of Toronto and, you know, we were fighting for every bit of money, resources that we could. And I found one of my old speeches I presented at city hall and, um, I read it over and I was like "wow, I was so illiterate, so illiterate." So, and, you know, at the time dealing with intercity children how much literacy was there? There...it was more trying to, not warehouse them, we did a lot of exciting things. One of the things I did with them, which they would still remember- they're all like 30 some'm now- we'd go to a graveyard. And so we would read the people's names, we'd figure out when they were born, how old they were when they died and we talked about, um, and we also talk about, sort of, reincarnation. Was anybody born on the same day as you? You know? And so...yeah, so we would be, you know, so like the kids were all sittin, you know? We talked about well, you know, daddy what happens when you die? What are you gunna do? So of course they go home and they're riding the subway with their... their parents, "Hey guess what? We went to the graveyard. Diana knows where she is going to be buried. Where? What's gunna happen . . . ?" You know? You know? But, "let's, let's not be afraid." Kids, kids are curious- "well, what's in there?" "Well, let's go take a look." It's public. It's not something private. So, that's what I mean about thinking outside the box. That's literacy. That's literacy and*

*numeracy. But how many, um, how many, um, teachers would even do that? They'd be like "Oh no, no, no, you can't go there." Why not? Why not? You know?*

Diana explains how some parents had a problem with this "out-of-the-box" kind of teaching.

*It's more... I guess it can be a cultural clash. It can be something in their background that they're not used to. So they're like "why did you do the cemetery thing?" Cuz when the cemetery thing came up again one of my friends said well "what were you doing with my kid? Why would you take them there?" And it's like well, but this is what we did. It's like they couldn't get beyond the fact that it was a cemetery. So it's like I don't even think sometimes. Maybe that's the problem. But I just . . . why not? What is wrong with that learning? Because you're afraid of a cemetery, so you should instill that same fear into your child when they are curious? And they're learning! You know, "wow, here's a kid, here's a kid who died. Here's a baby who died." You know, "in the old days" and we talk about health and, you know, what year was that? What was going on at that time? So, I mean, there's history, there's all sorts of stuff in one single tombstone. You know?*

Diana explores her pedagogical beliefs. Learning can happen anywhere and anytime. She continues by stating:

*When teaching I would take anything and turn it into a learning experience, like you know, "here's a stick . . ." Oh by the way, I would also start, I would spell out, I still do this today with kids, uh, is spell things out- "Oh do you really need some H. E. L. P. with that?" And then they stop. They think, "Oh yeah, yeah, I could use some help." But it's what you do every day. If you rely on the recipe cards and of course your supervisor dictates to you as to what's appropriate and appropriate is you stick to the curriculum at the time.*

Blatantly, Diana expresses pressures to homogenize curriculum and conform to her supervisor's pedagogical beliefs instead begin able to align her practice with her own pedagogical beliefs. She continues by describing the curricular approach her centre adopted when she first entered the field:

*Back in the day, literacy curriculum was um, just the basic, like circle time here's the book, like . . . it was all theme based; seasonal, you know . . . it wasn't . . . Because of the first supervisor that I worked with and, you know, then me being the supervisor, the first supervisor I worked with, it was like here, she was a control freak so she had to plan out everything and then you just had to do it. So there was no creativity or anything with it.*

*I have a Montessori background as well, um, so I could, I use some of those tools because a lot of the Montessori stuff too you can make, right? For, for numeracy, um, as well as literacy, but it was, I mean, very basic. Um, I mean, if you look sitting in a circle was sitting in a circle and holding up a storybook, um, I mean compared to, you*

*know, the drumming and listening to the words to the songs. I mean, how many four-year-old kids can sing 'I just want to live my life', you know? And beat to the music, so it was, you can't really compare, um . . . and when you're looking, in those days, even as a program advisor, um, any legislation is a minimum requirement. You just get the minimum. And you're fine.*

*So, as long as story time, kids are sitting in a circle and you're reading a book, that was basically the, the extent of it. Um, and certainly, you know, doing the whole collection, writing out recipe cards and all that kinda, well that kinda stuff is now online. There is lots of resources that are, are online but that just didn't exist then. It was the old paper, pencil, buy a book and physical, you know, book. So there is, you know, the auditory literacy and then there is the, the written word. I find today kids, um, a lot of kids are auditory learners.*

Diana touches on a couple modes of learning: auditory and visual and then trails back into the topic of homogenized curriculum. She states:

*But me, I was a supervisor and a teacher so when I was a supervisor and a teacher, it was a free-for-all because, you know, I was out there. I would have a rabbit running around the room, um, you know, we would be doing pictures, anything that I, and I still do it today with kids, we'd write . . . now it's easy to take a picture of some activity that you're doing and then I print it off and then let's write, simply, what you're doing so you can go back and then read it. So that's even going to the graveyard and coming back and then writing about it. You know, what did you learn? You know, did you remember how old so and so was?*

*That's when, that's when I was my boss. When I had a boss, though, you gatta do what the boss says and . . . follow... Other than that I was left to my own devices. That's why they joke here because, um, there is a joke here about one of the teachers doesn't want me to come and take her lunch table, because the one time I did, this is when my daughter was, you know, here, we had a riot. The kids were like wild, right? Because we were just having fun, right? So that's, I mean, I can take any lunch table, you know, now but I mean that is sort of the joke- "oh my god, she's coming don't... you know? I can be in an airport anywhere around the world and kids are running around and I notice like some kid would stop right in front of me, look at me, then smile and then run off. It's like I'm a magnet. I'm a magnet. And it's like . . . You know? So, yeah, cuz they know I'm out of the box. So, I'd say for me, I want . . . Because literacy was not fun for me as a child. Um, my mother never read to me. Um, my daughter's father and I have certainly read to her and as you know she's a prolific writer. Prolific. Um, well, I still get her to look over my stuff. But that . . .*

*So now even with my friends' kids like we'll, um, my daughter was 11 and I had my friends daughter since virtually she was a baby. You know, we went and bought in cart so we'd take turns reading. She's 11, you know? But, and you can see anything is, you know- "Oh look at this fence F. E. N. C. E." It's just; it's natural now and then so learning can be fun. And it's not just about . . .*

She continues . . .

*So, I, I dunno. I just, I see everything as a, a learning experience, like kids for example today. Oh my god- bugs! "Ahhhhhhhhh" "What?" "Look at!" "Where?" It's like, are you kidding me? So, if I already know a kid has some kind of bizarre phobia because of his parents, usually, I attack it right away. I'll be walking along and "oh- geez, look at that!" and then I pick it up on my finger and, you know? "Oh can I see" "Sure, make a bridge" [so the bug would travel from my hand to theirs] and then, you know? But that, that would happen here. But it doesn't usually happen at other centres, it would be like "Oh yeah, we'll get rid of that- smack!" But with this experience you can do so many things. You can even integrate literacy teaching and learning; for example, cell phones- take a picture of the thing like the bug on the kids finger, print it off and then, you know, "I had this green bug on my finger" It's simple. That's why, you know, the kids can all relate to what's happening on those walls out there at this centre cuz it's an actual picture of them doing something.*

*So that has been, and I've spent like how much of my own personal money over the years because that's important, putting stuff like that together for kids. Here's your own journal book. Write in a journal, you know? Doesn't matter what you write. Doesn't have to be correct, because eventually one day it will be, you know? It's like eventually we're all going to be toilet trained. If you're not toilet trained by the time you get to school, oh you get to school and you're going to be toilet trained quickly. You know? You're going to read as long as that environment is there. But the educators have to make sure that they were supplying the correct information. Educators have to be literate. But the educators I supervised were practically illiterate so they were writing things wrong in the children's journals. My solution to this was I hired a consultant from the university to come and help the teachers write in the kids journals – the reason that I did this was because their notes could be misread. And if it came down to it, if there were issues that came up from this then the law might have to be involved.*

*Educators also have to simply look beyond whatever the activity is and integrating it, so you know, god forbid there wouldn't be all the candy sitting in a playroom but, you know, "hey, like let's look how many black ones there are, how many orange ones and, you know, write it down. So, just looking at whatever is your activity on the table, like you can say okay we have to get through this dadadadadah, but "hey let's like make it exciting" "Oh by the way there's black. Let's pull out the black jelly beans and the orange ones" Of course we have to foil with them, otherwise we can't really eat them cuz our hands would be all over them. Um, but you know, counting and then always writing it down. So even what I would do with kids is, so I might have a piece of paper and they're always curious. They'll say "Oh hey, let's write this down" right? So I'd be sitting there and they'll be like "what are you writing?" "Oh, well I thought it was pretty cool. I was writing down the black 10 or 100 black jelly beans." Right? Cuz their curious. They always want to know what adults are doing.*

*This way children put learning into context. I think it's important that children put things in context. Eventually, I mean, if we're not putting pen to paper at some point how are they going to be . . . they're a visual learner but not in terms of seeing the written word. So, whether the written word is going to be on the computer, or actually on paper, somewhere along the line we have to have, um, the context of whatever is happening, put on paper so that we can also recognize the words to that experience. So when I, when I write, when I take a picture of a child doing something and then I write that story, if I cover up the words, they are still gonna know what the story is. But then when they see the words and it starts to formulate what that story is and hopefully the grammar and whatever through repetition will fall into place. But if they don't have, that's what's really kinda hard about, like here is nice, but it's hard with storybooks. Yeah, okay you're reading Angela's Airplane and well none of these kids have ever been in an airplane. They wouldn't know what it feels like. Yes, I know it's a story but kids learn a lot faster when they have the context to it. So, you know, in terms of the jelly bean experience, they are smelling the jelly beans, they're counting them, probably, yes, they would eat them. But you know it's all part of the learning experience and putting that experience into context. For me it's all about the writing. Like it's all about the writing in terms of the context. Even if I just take a scrap piece of paper and I, I write out a word and I just leave it on the table, it's there. It's there . . .*

Diana then goes back to the topic of homogenized curriculum.

*When I had a supervisor, I would have to tip toe around the curriculum, like when I was physically close to the kids then I can say, you know, "piss" yeah, you know, "what this say?" Sometimes, if the kids were doing some artwork or something I might even lean over and just say "you know, really we write from left to write so try to start the name from over here" you know? I would never call anybody out on it. I'd do that so, um, and I had made up my mind, I don't know, when I first took the job that I was like okay "I'm just going to stick this out for a year and then I'm going to be supervisor." I don't know what, what went into my head. Like, how dare I even think that, you know? But, I lasted a year and then I got this job as a supervisor. Then I had the freedom to do what I wanted.*

*But nowadays childcare centres are more advanced, it's more creative, we're really looking at the needs of the child as oppose to the needs of the curriculum or what we're suppose to do. Today it relates to more of how I always thought. You know, let's just be creative, let's just be wild, but, but controlled. It doesn't mean that I can't get the kids under control once I want to.*

The conversation comes to a halt. I ask Diana to talk about any life experiences that have influenced her teachings. She states:

*I would say, um, maybe the biggest influence, and certainly my daughter can relate to this, having grown up, I mean I've done the same thing here. I'm, I grew up on a farm. So dirt and getting, you know, into it, you know, I don't have any issues with diving down on my hands and knees saying "hey look at this! Look at this hole," you know?*

*Um, because on the farm, they're, we were very isolated. So, the only friends were the animals. And so now, I mean, you can come to the barn with me after I find my cowboy boots, cuz I have to go to the barn on your way home. You can see my horse. And so, you know, I take kids out there with me and my horse is the biggest guy, but he loves kids. And, you know, it's like "Oh," you know, "can I help you clean his feet?" "Sure you can" "C'mon, I'll hold the foot up and you...but you gotta give her though. You gotta dig in there" you know? Um, so, I mean it's teaching them parts of the animal. And if I happen to see something like the one time, we can always collect things too. We had this, uh, I gave it to my daughter then I actually gave it to a teacher in her classroom, there was a, um, a hornets nest. And it was empty, right? So, one day my daughter said "wow, I'd really like to have that hornet's nest," right? You know so of course she's not really joking. What was she going to do with it? I dunno. I have no idea. But what I did was, that Christmas, I scraped it - eww it smelled. I put carpet freshener on it. I put it in a box along with, I bought a microscope, and... right? . . . So, for me, it's always one thing against the next. So what, yeah, the weird thing was the hornets nest. But that wasn't so weird to me. Because I'm putting a microscope with it and you know so, but people, especially when it comes to farming, kids need to be exposed more to animals and dirt.*

*I think that playing in the dirt and with animals can truly support children's print literacy. I mean, the kids love comin to my house. My friends' kids practically grew up there. Well you've been to my house. There's the creek. There's a forest. There's sometimes, you know, when the kids were younger we'd be laying on the ground on our stomachs and diggin in the dirt and talking about worm poop or whatever and then come inside and "Oh let's, hey do you remember when we did blah blah blah," you know? So, that's what's exciting about this, this particular program and that's what I [pause] . . . teachers here have it but if, you know, the other teachers that are still stuck in their high school days, which I think that's what some of the teachers in the public school systems are battling with. This, you know, generation of people who are coming, you know, entitled. They feel that their entitled to whatever even this teacher is getting. And, you know, it's not happening . . . but anyway that's a side note.*

*But looking back it's interesting because in your position and you're still at that young age. You are still influenced by your parents too. So for example I caught myself around the eating routines where it's like "no, you have to finish everything on your plate otherwise you don't get desert," "No, you have to eat like this." You know, like "you can't open the Oreo cookie and scrape the icing off. That's just rude" Why can't you do that? You know? So there is that transition and if you are self aware, then you can do something about it.*

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Coda: Lunch was delivered to us in the teacher's lounge. I look at the list of tentative interview questions and realize we've covered quite a bit. Our conversation trails off topic. I stop recording.

Epilogue: For Diana, personal beliefs regarding literacy and *play-based* learning, manifested over the course of her entire life, namely over the course of her many careers within the ECE field. Her past experiences as an ECE, parent, childcare advisor and board development trainer helped shape her current pedagogical stance: learning happens anywhere and that educators must “think outside the box.” Despite her personal beliefs, Diana blatantly acknowledges the pressures she has experienced during the course of her ECE career, namely the pressures to homogenize curricula.

From reflective journal: The tally results regarding the narrative styles Diana used during our interview showed that she did not use description; she used argumentation ten times; augmentation once; theorizing eight times; and told six stories that had clear boundaries of a beginning, middle and end. This tally helped illuminate Diana’s feelings of distance from her current practical experiences. The lack of description suggests that she may not currently have the in-classroom experience to be able to provide greater detail. But, her previous experience is vast, which is reflected in the amount of stories provided during her interview. The high levels of argumentations points to Diana’s confidence, but she is still in the process of theorizing major concepts about play and literacy.

There were hesitations and silent moments throughout Diana’s interview, often to ensure that she presents her words accurately or to change her train of thought; add greater detail; change the sequence of information presented; or take a moment to think of what to say next. At times she had unfinished thoughts, where her sentences would fade away. These moments are marked with dotted lines and spaces in her interpretive story. These moments also illuminate the areas where she theorizes certain concepts. The speed, delivery and volume of responses provided during the interview were moderate with a considerable amount of inflection and emotion, which further denotes that Diana was seemingly confident during our interview.

Diana positions herself in a way to express that although she practiced *theme-based* curriculum during her time as an ECE she did not necessarily agree with the practice. Often times she would practice *play-based* styles of teaching even though her supervisor was *pro theme-based* curriculum. It was not until Diana became supervisor where she was able to put a more *play-based/environmental* approach to practice.

#### **4.8 Concluding Remarks**

In exploring the answers to my research questions, I conducted interviews with six preschool educators using an “interview guide approach” (Cohen, Manion, et al., 2011, p. 413). From these interviews I was able to co-construct each interpretive story presented in this chapter with participants. Following each interpretive story, selected excerpts from my reflective notes were presented. I selected notes that were most salient



to the research questions. It is important to note that my notes included other reflections that were not presented in this chapter. These reflections included, but were not limited to, my response to the following questions: Who are the characters in this conversation? What are the main events? Where/When do they occur? As researcher, how am I positioned in relation to the participant? As researcher, how am I positioned during this conversation? How am I responding emotionally and intellectually to this participant? What can I learn about our interactions from the appearance of the text? Does the participant ask me a question without giving me time to respond? Are there places in the interview transcript where I feel I could have responded but didn't? Why didn't I respond?

As noted in previous chapters, I undertook this investigation into preschool teachers' beliefs and practices about print literacy and play pedagogies because I was concerned about a perceived lack of theoretical knowledge about literacy and play among preschool educators. The interpretive stories presented in this chapter were constructed collaboratively with participants in order to further this concern. In the next chapter I discuss these interpretive accounts of preschool educators' stories of practice in relation to some recurring ideas and motifs that I noticed when analyzing the data.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

#### 5.1 Overview

Did my respondents lack theoretical knowledge to support their practice? The stories presented in Chapter four do not provide a definitive answer to this question, but they suggest that the participating ECEs felt constrained by thematic and skills-based curricula and by curricula that privileged subject matter and skills over children's interests. The ways in which the ECEs expressed their concerns varied and the concerns appeared to be linked to past as well as current professional experiences.

In this chapter, I draw attention to a few recurring ideas and motifs in the participants' accounts of their experiences with print pedagogy. The two dominant ideas presented across these stories were: (1) ECEs were integrating *play-based* learning in various ways and to various extents within specific curricular approaches and (2) the discussions pertaining to *play-based* learning referenced play as a general curricular resource rather than play as a resource solely for print literacy development. In keeping with the study's purpose, this chapter draws attention to those discussions about play and print literacy.

Reflecting upon the stories, I recognized that ECEs intentionally and unintentionally referenced theories that they use in their practice. I wondered, however, whether the ECEs had enough opportunities to reflect on what the theories meant in relation to their literacy-related practices. I present the following discussion as a starting point for critical dialogue. As mentioned, I hope that such a dialogue can lead to improvements in professional learning programs and/or ignite positive change in ECEs'

current practices.

The discussion presented in this chapter pertains to the following recurring ideas and motifs identified in the stories of practice: a *mercurial* attitude toward play pedagogies; the integration of knowledge about play within specific curricular approaches; tensions between *prescriptive* and *emergent* curricula; and the idea that *play-based* pedagogies is not for everyone.

## **5.2 A Mercurial Attitude Toward Play Pedagogies**

The way in which Penny's interview unfolded for me was reminiscent of the character of Mercutio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Penny and Mercutio both seemed to change their minds easily, yet they did so dramatically. I remember writing a paper in my undergraduate studies about Mercutio, where I explained all the ways in which he lived up to his name. Certainly he never attached himself to either the Capulet family or the Montagues. In the film version I watched, the actor never attached himself to a specific gender either; for example he dressed up in woman's clothes when attending a banquet hosted by the Capulets. Similarly, Penny never attached herself to one curricular approach. For example, some of the ways in which Penny talked about *theme-based* curriculum reflected what Heydon and Wang (2006) call a *prescriptive* approach. Penny appeared to value direct instruction (e.g., Nickse, 1993) and she described her curriculum as "tightly ordered and normalized" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 92) by themes. However, she deviated from *prescriptive* curricula when she talked of children's interests (Heydon, 2013) and sometimes positioned children as curricular informants (Harste, 2003). These comments align with Heydon and Wang's description of the *emergent* curriculum approach. In interpretive story #1, Penny's comments illustrate what

I mean by a *mercurial* attitude in relation to play and *theme-based* approaches. She described her current literacy program and oscillated between *prescriptive* and *emergent* curricular approaches. The comments she made places Penny's curricular approach in the middle of Heydon and Wang's continuum. Heydon and Wang refer to the middle of this continuum as an adaptive curricular approach.

In my reflective notes, I observed that Penny used argumentation and theorizing in equal ratio and notice now that each example of theorization pertained to a set of new ideas. For example, Penny was theorizing concepts in relation to literacy and play. These were two concepts I noticed that she was re-conceptualizing aloud during our interview. I noticed too that during my interview with Penny, her sentences would frequently fade away before her thought had been completed. Often she would pause or hesitate then make an ambivalent comment such as "I don't know" or "I guess so." As I continued to analyze the data, I noticed that these comments marked the moments where Penny was in the process of theorizing literacy and play pedagogies. I then decided to take a closer look at each example of argumentation to see if I found more inconsistencies that related to Penny's *mercurial* attitude towards play. I noticed that each example of argumentation referred to old versus new ideas: *theme-based* versus *play-based* pedagogies. For example, Penny expressed a sense of certainty when she referred to *theme-based* pedagogies used in her practice but she also expressed a level of certainty when she referred to *emergent* pedagogical approaches such as the use of indirect literacy facilitation (e.g., labeling the toy bins or using children as curricular informants). More often than not though, Penny's examples of argumentation pertained to claims about her students' skills and abilities and I noticed that it was during these times that she

expressed the highest level of confidence. It appeared to me that Penny's *mercurial* attitude was tied closely to discussions about play. I wondered if she saw play as an interloper in the dominant curriculum story; the new kid on the block that was making Penny question her practices with *prescriptive* curriculum- an approach that she has been putting to practice since she entered the field. It seems to me that this recent interest in *play-based* pedagogies has created messiness in the ECEs' *funds of knowledge*. *Play-based* pedagogies has come to mean something specific due to the recent launch of the FDK program and private childcare settings seem to be at a loss as to what curricular approach they should be putting to practice. Advice documents (e.g. OME, 2010, 2014). suggests that private childcare setting should adopt the same curricular approach as that of the FDK program in order to provide a smoother transition into public school. However, from my own professional observations I noticed that most childcare settings do not put play-based pedagogies to practice; rather they adopt approaches such as, *Montessori*, *Core Knowledge*, *Waldorf*, *theme-based* or *project-based*. I wonder if increased coordination by the Ministry of Education will change the current situation.

A *mercurial* attitude is further demonstrated when Penny's ideas bounce back and forth between liking and/disliking play pedagogies. Her comments also show that she once again oscillates between *play-based* and *theme-based* approaches.

In contrast to Penny's *mercurial* attitude towards *theme-based* and *play-based* pedagogies, Erica's stories of practice revealed a more confident and stable attitude towards play. My reflective notes highlighted data which showed a high ratio of argumentation, description and stories, compared to that of theorizing within Erica's interview transcript. This data helped illuminate a high level of confidence and stability

in Erica's accounts with print and play pedagogies. But I wondered why there was so much difference between these two stories of practice. Was it because Penny was not comfortable talking about her practices in this way? Does it mean that the new curricular orientations referenced in official curricular documents (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; OME, 2010) have not been properly explained to Penny and other ECEs? Or does it simply mean that Penny has not had the time to fully understand and embrace *play-based* pedagogies? To further reflect on these questions, I reviewed some contrasting data such as the level of reflective practice present in Erica's accounts verses the level of reflective practice present in Penny's accounts. It appeared to me that Erica had more opportunities for reflection for she made comments such as, "So that is why we design our own curriculum sheet and that is why we now are looking at it and reevaluating it." Penny's comments however did not show this level of reflection. Although Erica seemed to have talked about a lot of opportunities for reflection, I wondered whether the other participating ECEs had enough opportunities, especially during the current era of educational reform. The stories as a set suggest that there may be a lack of organizational commitment to reflection and comprehension of the *emergent* approach within participants' childcare settings. This area for concern is further addressed in the following chapter.

### **5.3 Integrating Knowledge of Play Within a Specific Curricular Approach**

Pedagogies are shaped by curricular approaches. ECE settings that privilege academics are likely to constrain ECEs' efforts to adopt the *emergent* approach. The ECEs' stories of practice presented in Chapter four suggest that the participating ECEs may have felt constrained by thematic and skills-based curricula and by curricula that

privileged subject matter and skills over children's interests. I have experienced these constraints in my own professional practice. Although I have some theoretical knowledge about play and print literacy to support my practice, I have felt that *prescriptive* curricula, or curricula that privileges subject matter over children's interests, prevented me from actively drawing on theories I believed in. The ways in which the ECEs expressed their concerns varied and they appeared to be linked to their experiences with specific curricular approaches, such as *Core Knowledge*, *High Scope*, *themes* and *Montessori*. This evidence corroborates findings made by McMullen et al., (2006), who found that educators associate their beliefs with the specific curricular approach they were told to practice and that educators who work in childcare centres that employ preplanned curricula and teacher directed learning were said to have more academically-oriented beliefs. All of the curricular approaches listed above designate specific times for certain activities to take place during the school day, so even if an approach did not privilege the academic components of a curriculum, time constraints still make it difficult for ECEs to fully implement the *emergent* approach within their practice. Therefore, the ways in which and the extent to which ECEs can mobilize their knowledge about play within their professional practices is dependent on the type of curricular approach their centre adopts.

Although organizations constrict ECEs' efforts to actively draw on theories about play to support their print literacy-related practices, ECEs were still able to mobilize some knowledge about play. Penny's stories of practice, for example, revealed that she employed playful literacy-related opportunities within an organization that adopted *theme-based* curriculum. Penny's comments relating to the retrieval of ideas from Pinterest about literacy-related games that draw on social semiotic theories, further

demonstrates the ways in which Penny mobilized her knowledge about play within the affordances of her practice. Though, taking into account the considerable amount of uncertainty in Penny's tone of voice, it is more likely that she unintentionally implemented theories about play within her literacy-related practices.

The level of uncertainty and lack of self-confidence I inferred from Penny's voice may have been due to the overall structure of her work environment, which may have made it difficult for her to go against what she was told to practice; or it may have simply been due to Penny seeking validation from me as the researcher of this study. In any event, Penny's comments showed that she experienced constraints within her practice. For instance, in interpretive story #1, Penny mentioned how the owner of her workplace overpowers Penny's efforts to implement *emergent* curricular approaches. Her absentee boss periodically visits the centre and removes the labels Penny puts on the toy bins. Penny explains that once her boss leaves, Penny has to "just redo it." I inferred a level of defeat in Penny's tone of voice when she describes these events, which may help explain why the toy bins did not have many labels on the day of our interview.

Where Penny seemed to be integrating playful learning opportunities unintentionally within an organization that adopts the *theme-based* curriculum, Steph seemed purposeful in her adoption of playful pedagogies. However, Steph was trying to mobilize her knowledge about play within an organization that adopts both the *Core Knowledge* and *Montessori* approach. During our interview Steph described *Core Knowledge* as an approach to teaching and learning that expands on Vygotsky's (1978) notion of scaffolding. She explained that the *Core Knowledge* approach encourages children to learn "core" subjects through song, rhymes, poems and group games. She also



explained that the *Montessori* approach used at her centre encourages literacy learning through the following types of independent activities: sandpaper lettering, the use of various chalkboard and play dough lettering activities and etc. The time it takes to fit both of these curricular approaches into a day makes it impossible for Steph to adopt the *emergent* approach. Not to mention the fact that sociocultural theories that align with the *emergent* approach draw into question the independent play practices endorsed by the *Montessori* approach. But Steph expressed that even if she wanted to change the structure of her work environment, she would not be able to.

It is clear that Steph finds it challenging to adopt the *emergent* approach within her practice; however, her stories about experiences with print do reference theories about play. The way in which Steph's accounts unfolded for me led me to infer that Steph knew about cognitive research that aligned with Roskos and Christie's (2011b) *play-literacy interface*. For example, in interpretive story #2, Steph described several "extensions to storybooks" that her co-teachers can implement, rather than her co-teacher implementing traditional methods of reading a story and resorting to free play straightaway. Steph is discontent with this traditional method her co-teacher constantly puts to practice. However the source of this discontent may not be that of play itself. Rather Steph may feel that literacy can be enhanced through play and so she provides her co-teacher with playful strategies.

Similar to Steph, Erica also integrates knowledge about play within a programmatic curricular approach, but instead of mobilizing her knowledge within an organization that adopts an approach similar to Steph's practice, Erica mobilized her knowledge within an organization that takes on an eclectic curricular approach. Erica had

more autonomy than Steph. For example, Erica explains in interpretive story #4 that instead of “trying to fit a mold” she tries to use a curricular framework that uses “bits and pieces” from various educational approaches, uniting them into one. This, of course, is problematic because the approaches are not necessarily commensurable with one another. There are conflicting elements in Erica’s comments about this eclectic approach. For instance, Erica noted that her centre only recently adopted a “fully *emergent* approach.” But later she stated: “We haven’t adapted to one way of doing it.” I wonder if this is even possible. Currently, there is only “one way of doing it,” which is reflected in current official curricular documents (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; OME, 2010). Nevertheless, Erica actively drew on theories about play in her stories of practice. Throughout our interview Erica identified a range of playful learning opportunities of the kind described by Roskos and Christie (2011b). For example, in interpretive story #4, Erica described a play dough activity, and other literacy related practices that she believes enhance children’s “pre-writing” and “pre-literacy” skills.

Upon closer reflection of Erica’s accounts, it would appear that Erica does not follow a conventional definition of literacy. She stated that, “literacy to us is more than print.” Her definition of literacy includes, for instance, children dictating stories to an educator and children making designs on a paper or in play dough. Social semiotic theories have been circulating in the literature for nearly 20 years now and whether Erica explicitly made reference to such theories, the ideas that surround social semiotic theories or other theories such as sociocultural or cognitive theories are circulating in real-life practice contexts. For example, in Erica’s personal narrative she wrote:

*What is literacy? Does it only encompass books and reading? It is so much more than that. How we promote literacy in our programs will impact the children in our care for the rest of their lives. When I first graduated I did focus more on reading stories as the focal point of literacy in our program. However when I joined the staff at this centre in 1981, I realized that there is so much more to literacy than simply reading stories. I do not want to give the impression that reading stories is not important because it is very important and I always read many stories throughout the day. However there are many ways to expand on this. How we read stories to the children in our group is crucial, over exaggerating, using different voice tones; soft, loud, matching the tone to the words is essential in keeping everyone's attention and making the story come to life.*

*It is important to expose children to many different types of stories; reading books, telling stories using puppets/props, audio stories and felt stories. One of my favourite styles of books is books that are written to a song. One of my teaching partners was great at playing the piano and guitar. We would have sing-a-long circles where I would hold the book, turn the pages while she played. We had many favourite books such as Tingolaya, Baby Beluga, The Wheels on the Bus, Eency Weency Spider etc. etc. The children enjoyed this activity and remained focused for 30-40 minutes at a time.*

This section of the chapter has provided several examples of many that show ECEs mobilizing their knowledge about play and literacy within the affordance of their

practices. However, the dominant idea present in each story is that the specific curricular approaches adopted at each centre govern ECEs' practices. Structured curricula or curricula that privilege subject matter over children's interests seem to be a leading factor in preventing ECEs from actively applying theories to practice. There is a strong need for reflective practice and critical dialogue to make changes to the situation, which I address in the next chapter.

#### 5.4 Tensions Between *Prescriptive* and *Emergent* Curricular Approaches

As noted earlier, curricular routines seem to govern participating ECEs' practices with play. The way in which Nina's interview unfolded for me was one of tension between the ways her organization wants the teacher to be versus the ways the teacher wants to be. Nina does not like *prescriptive* curricular approaches or the *theme-based* curriculum adopted at her centre, but she is obligated to put the *theme-based* approach in practice. This has caused her to feel disempowered and discouraged. A substantial portion of my interview with Nina involved her commenting on how she did not agree with *theme-based* curricular orientations currently put in practice at her centre. In interpretive story #3, Nina expressed that she would rather implement the *emergent* curriculum but feels constrained by the *prescriptive* routines that currently govern her practice. Nina explained that she was once able to restructure her work environment when she first entered the field because the approach her centre adopted clashed with her values and beliefs. The centre had previously adopted the *Montessori* approach and Nina's aversion for the *Montessori* curriculum empowered her to make a structural change. But the centre replaced the *Montessori* approach with the *theme-based* approach, which made Nina feel discouraged because the curricular approach once again clashed

with her values and beliefs. Her comments expressed a sense of defeat. However, a sense of hope lingered in Nina's final comments about *theme-based* curriculum. Her aversion towards the *theme-based* curriculum seems to be empowering her once again to restructure her work environment. For example, she stated: "But, slowly, slowly, because I am very stubborn, if I want, if I put my mind to something, I will do it."

Similarly, Diana also struggled to reconcile *prescriptive* and *emergent* curricular approaches. Despite the fact that Diana's personal beliefs regarding *play-based* pedagogies aligns with both sociocultural and social semiotic theories, she expressed feeling a tension when trying to put her beliefs in practice once she entered the field. When Diana obtained her first ECE position, *theme-based* curriculum was the dominant approach. Therefore Diana's boss enforced the *theme-based* approach. Diana felt she had "to do as the boss says and . . . follow . . ." However, once Diana obtained a supervisory position she was also able to overthrow the overall structure of her workplace. Although Diana had to conform to the dominant practices of her organization when she first entered the field, she was able to discard *theme-based* for an *emergent* curricular approach, a practice that aligns more with her own pedagogical beliefs.

### **5.5 *Play-Based Pedagogies Are Not for Me***

The stories as a set did not present any consensus about the nature or value of play pedagogies. For example, Penny's comments suggested that she might believe play is an act associated with mere messing around. She stated: "I don't believe in just letting them do whatever they want . . . It just seems like they are not learning anything." This comment suggests that she might view this type of play as an ineffective catalyst for teaching and learning. She then described a different type of play when providing several

examples of literacy-related learning opportunities that used play as a teaching and learning tool. For example, she showed me a game she made from Pinterest, which aimed to enhance students' language and numeracy skills- a game that also made reference to social semiotic theories. However, as mentioned previously, Penny's uncertainty in her tone of voice- among other contributing factors- made me infer that she may have been integrating theories about play unintentionally.

Sarah also described play as an ineffective catalyst for teaching and learning. Where Penny seemed to have integrated play into her practice unintentionally, it seemed Sarah chose not to integrate play intentionally and this seemed to be related to her past experiences with *play-based* learning. In interpretive story #5, Sarah described her experience with *play-based* learning when she was a child. Her memories led her to regard play as ineffective.

Sarah also explained to me that her current workplace was academically oriented and that although play was integrated into students' daily routine, play was implemented as merely free playtime. There was no mention of adult facilitation during this time and it seemed to me that she had not put any critical thought about the benefits play could offer young children. However, in interpretive story #5, Sarah provided several elaborate examples of the ways in which play supports print literacy, which conflicted with her initial comments about *play-based* learning being ineffective. These comments- among others- showed me that Sarah recognized the ways in which pretend play can be integrated into her practice, however, Sarah's personal beliefs about *play-based* pedagogy being an ineffective means to support children's development seems to prevent Sarah from enacting play pedagogies within her practice.

For Sarah, it would appear that both her childhood experiences and her work experiences/routines greatly influenced her current beliefs and attitudes in relation to play pedagogies, more so than that of her pre-service training experiences which focused largely on *play-based* practices. This evidence corroborates Sherwood and Reifel's (2010) study, which found that ECEs' perception of play as a learning practice relied heavily on personal experiences.

## **5.6 Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, I drew attention to some recurring ideas and motifs present in participants' accounts with print literacy-related practices, which illuminated two findings: (1) ECEs were integrating *play-based* learning in various ways and to various extents in spite of curricular approaches that did not necessarily support *play-based* pedagogies; and (2) the discussions pertaining to *play-based* learning referenced play as a general curriculum resource rather than a resource for supporting print literacy. The ECEs referenced theories when telling stories about their practices with print, but whether they used these theories intentionally was not clear. In the next chapter I further discuss these findings and their implications for practice and for further study.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### 6.1 Overview

In this chapter I draw on the data presented in Chapter four and the discussion offered in Chapter five to directly respond to my research questions. I asked: What can be learned about preschool educators' *funds of knowledge* from stories of practice about print literacy pedagogies? What beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy are expressed in those stories? What obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies are expressed? What do stories of practice reveal about the extent to which they value play? And lastly, what do stories reveal about the ways in which beliefs about play mediate planning of curricular experiences? In responding to the above research questions, I aim to provoke critical conversation among education stakeholders. I hope that such a dialogue can lead to improvements in professional development programs as well as ECEs' current practices with print literacy and play.

As mentioned in Chapter three, to prepare this chapter I treated the stories as objects for examination (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In so doing I inferred an overarching story or meta-narrative in the data, one that was multifaceted and held various other stories within it, some of which even contradicted each other. The master narrative was one in which ECEs' *funds of knowledge* were conflicting with the valued practices embedded in official curricular documents. I wondered whether ECEs had enough opportunities to reflect on practices, in particular practices that brought print literacy and play together. I teased out several stories hidden beneath the master narrative.



## 6.2     **Preschool Educators' *Funds of Knowledge* from Stories of Practice about Print Literacy Pedagogies**

Upon reflection across stories, I noticed that the participating ECEs had referenced theories that were linked to print literacy. What I learned from participants' accounts was that print-related practices were informed by theories that were mostly held tacitly. I found that participants' comments referenced theories that I had encountered in the literature, but it was not clear if the participants were consciously or purposefully drawing on these theories. The ways in which we think about theories matter, and based on the literature I reviewed, it would seem that theories are more commonly viewed as de-contextualized research-based ideas that are then actively applied within professional practices. However, as noted in the previous chapter, whether ECEs made explicit reference to theories, the ideas surrounding cognitive, sociocultural and social semiotic theories seemed to be circulating in their real-life practice contexts. If theories were viewed as embodied in practice, then perhaps there would not be a perceived gap between theory and practice circulating within the ECEC research literature. But theories are not viewed this way; thus there is a stronger need for reflective practice and critical discourse in order to provide ECEs more opportunities to develop praxis.

Nina and Penny's accounts about print literacy are two of the many examples that make reference to theories related to print. For instance, the way in which Penny's personal narrative unfolded for me made me realize that her comments about image and sound effects referenced social semiotic theories. However, as mentioned in Chapter four and five, the level of uncertainty present in Penny's comments and the lack of vocabulary associated with multimodality and multiliteracies point to the improbability that Penny

referenced such theories purposefully.

Nina's comments about her practices related to print literacy also referenced theories. In interpretive story #3, it would appear that Nina's current literacy practices are informed by sociocultural and cognitive research that attest to the notion that socio-dramatic play enhances children's literacy development (Cooper, 2005; Pellegrini & Galda, 2000; Wohlwend, 2008). Her comments highlight the view that dramatic play enhances children's metacognitive language (Pellegrini & Galda, 2000); for example when she stated that children ask themselves questions about what to do next during play, she elaborates on the meta-cognitive thought process behind socio-dramatic play. But, even in this example, it is not clear whether Nina consciously draws on these theories to support her practice for she did not make explicit reference to theories when telling stories about her practices.

It seems clear that reflective practice and engaging in critical discourse about professional practices with play would significantly benefit these ECEs in developing praxis. In turn, researchers like myself can better identify the ways in which ECEs draw on theories to support their practice for critical discourse encourages the explicit reference to theories when commenting about one's practice. An increase in reflection and critical discourse may change the perception within the ECEC research literature that ECEs lack the theoretical knowledge to support their print literacy-related practices.

Stories also revealed a lack of consensus about the definition of print literacy. As already discussed in Chapter five, some participants' were in the process of redefining print literacy, such as Penny. Her ambivalence, for instance, marked the moments where she was theorizing the concept of literacy aloud during our interview. Penny's

ambivalence- among other factors discussed in Chapter five- suggests to me that Penny would benefit largely from opportunities to critically reflect upon practices relevant to print literacy. Others held a broad definition to be true, such as Erica and Diana. For example, Erica described literacy as more than print and explained that reflective practice is critical in helping practitioners keep a breast with current discussions about concepts such as literacy. To this end, reflective practice seems to be a major contributing factor in the comprehension of literacy as more than print.

I also learned that some print pedagogies described by participants were play-oriented whereas others were not. Diana's comments, for example, highlights that ways in which she integrates literacy-related practices within a *play-based* environment. Sarah's comments, however, highlights print literacy and play as separate activities. However, upon closer reflection of Sarah's comments and drawing attention to my own "smooth stories," (Clandinin et al., 2010, p. 82), I noticed some conflicting elements in Sarah's comments. For example, Sarah stated that play and learning literacy are separate activities, yet she showed how digital literacies were incorporated in children's play. These conflicting stories and others like these stories could be further interrogated through critical reflective practice.

### **6.3 The ECEs' Beliefs about the Role of Play in Young Children's Literacy**

My investigation on participating ECEs' beliefs about the role of play for early learners was inconclusive. As noted in the previous chapter, data also revealed no consensus about the role of play in young children's literacy development. For instance, Penny viewed the role of play as mere messing around whereas others viewed play as a highly skills process (e.g., Erica and Diana). It appears to me that those ECEs who

viewed play and learning literacy as separate activities seemed to believe that play is an ineffective catalyst for teaching and learning, which corroborates with Einarsdottir's (2014) findings that beliefs and practices seemed "constrained by traditions in which play and learning are separate entities" (p. 93). But those ECEs who described play and literacy as one activity seem to believe that play was an effective catalyst for teaching and learning. It appears to me that the ECEs who were "constrained by traditions in which play and learning are separate" (Einarsdottir, 2014, p. 93) would benefit greatly from critical reflection about play and the ways in which play can support learning for young children.

The variation in beliefs about the role of play in young children's literacy is likely due to the fact that there is no fixed definition of play. The Ontario FDK program only recently concretely defined what it means to learn through play. This leads me to believe that there has been a lack of organizational commitment to reflection and comprehension of the *emergent* approach within private childcare settings. After conducting my literature review and interviews with participants, I realized that there is a blurred line when it comes to terms that include *play*, which made it difficult for me to draw conclusions from the data about play. Some terms referred directly to print literacy (Roskos and Christie, 2011b). For example, as mentioned in the previous chapter Steph's use of the term play draws reference to playful learning opportunities with literacy; what she called "extensions to storybooks." But other terms were more about current debates and conversations related to the *emergent* curriculum referenced in official curricular documents (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2007; OME, 2010). For instance, the comments Nina made in her personal narrative echoes the idea that all educational

settings should include: responsive relationships; learning through exploration, play, and collaborative inquiry; educators as co-learners; environments as third teachers and pedagogical documentation (OME, 2014). The one idea not mentioned by Nina from the list provided in the Ontario Ministry of Education's recent document (2014), however, was the need for reflective practice. This evidence further denotes that critical reflection is not a predominant idea circulating within the ECEs' professional practices. I wonder if education stakeholders can make a change to this situation.

#### **6.4 Obstacles to Enacting *Play-Based* Pedagogies**

Stories of practice revealed that there were three major obstacles expressed when trying to enact *play-based* pedagogies: (1) a desire to please parents prevented ECEs from enacting play in their practices; (2) the school readiness issue prevented ECEs from enacting *play-based* pedagogies; and (3) an obligation to conform to the institutional routines that govern ECEs practices prevented them from enacting *play-based* pedagogies. Although I have already briefly mentioned some of these obstacles present in the data, this section draws closer attention to each of these obstacles within participating ECEs' accounts.

Participants' accounts suggested that ECEs felt a desire to please parents. Penny's accounts, for example, suggested that Penny's actions may be driven by her desire to please those students' parents who privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others and as a result *play-based* pedagogies were not fully enacted within her practice. As described in Chapter five, Penny stated that pre-cut material "makes for better art" because "parents appreciate it more." It can be argued that Penny's desire to please students' parents is, in a way, her attempt to preserve her identity as an effective teacher. There is compelling

evidence from Canadian studies that suggests that the ways in which ECEs conceptualize their work and the ways in which others view their work have implications for their survival as a professional group (e.g. Langford, 2006, 2010, Langford et al., 2013). Thereby, as a means to preserve her identity as an effective teacher, Penny caters to parents' desires. I continue to wonder whether Penny's pedagogical decisions are a consequence of living in an "audit society" (Power, 1997) where parents favour skills-based instruction over *play-based* pedagogies. Nevertheless, Penny holds power in what she sends home and what class work she presents to parents. Parents see their children's work and view Penny as valuable for their child(ren)'s academic success. Penny is able to preserve her identity as an effective teacher, but her students are the ones marginalized in the process for there is considerable evidence (e.g., CCL, 2006; OME, 2010, 2014) that suggests, "play nourishes every aspect of children's development" (p. 2) and that those ECEs who focus on the academic components of their curriculum may not be providing early learners with a well-rounded educational experience; nor are they laying a foundation for a smooth transition into school.

Similar to Penny, Steph also expressed a keen desire to please parents, making it difficult for her to fully adopt *play-based* pedagogies within her practice. In interpretive story #2, Steph described all of the expectations she is required to meet as the *Core Knowledge* teacher and team leader. Her comments made me infer that Steph may feel a desire to please her students' parents because her identity as an effective teacher also hinges on what others expect from her and how she can meet those expectations.

In many ways the ECEs' desire to please parents is also tied with the school readiness issue because most parents seemed to believe that placing more emphasis on

enhancing children's cognitive abilities will increase the likeliness of their child(ren)'s later academic success. Sarah's stories of practice revealed that she placed more focus on children's language and literacy skills because of the pressures placed on her by parents to prepare children's cognitive abilities for grade one. As a result, Sarah does not adopt *play-based* pedagogies within her current practice. It appears to me that the focus on child-centred approaches has now shifted to more of a society-centred approach for school readiness (Pelletier & Coter, 2002). The comments made in interpretive story #5 shows the pressures placed on Sarah by parents to prepare their child(ren) for grade one. It would seem that Sarah does not hold the same values as these parents, but much like Penny she still caters to parents' desires to prepare their child(ren) for formal school. It appears that because formal skills-based instruction is valued over *play-based* pedagogies, which is characteristic of an "audit society" (Power, 1997), Penny, Steph and Sarah refrain from enacting *play-based* pedagogies within their practices.

Participants' accounts also revealed that ECEs felt an obligation to conform to the institutional routines that governed their practice. The overall structure of Steph's work environment, for instance, is regimented and seemed to constrict Steph in distinctive ways, disabling her from fully enacting *play-based* pedagogies within her practice. In her personal narrative she wrote:

*Upon reflection, I do find it challenging to deliver all language components to children (books, poems, songs, nursery rhymes, sight words, reading, writing) with our current schedule (teaching all the other subjects). We are scheduled to teach Language Arts two times a week, but I always try to squeeze in a little literacy into the schedule every day.*

It would appear that Steph's workplace privileges subject matter over *play-based* curricula. This is, of course, problematic because childcare centres that privilege one type of curricula over the other make it difficult for ECEs to practice anything other than what they are told to practice. And as already mentioned, during my interview with Steph, she even expressed an inability to change the overall structure of her work environment even if she wanted.

As discussed in the previous chapters, Nina and Diana expressed similar concerns. It seems evident that the overall structure of the ECEs' work environments plays a significant role in the ways in which and the extent to which ECEs can enact *play-based* pedagogies within their practices. This made me question whether ECEs were able to mediate planning of curricular experiences at all based on their beliefs about play and print literacy. I address this concern in the latter sections of this chapter.

## **6.5 The Extent to Which the ECEs Value Play**

As already noted, a dominant idea in the data was that ECEs were integrating play in various ways and to various extents within programmatic curricula. Some ECEs valued the academic components of their curriculum over playful ones. I questioned whether this focus on academics was due to a desire to prepare early learners for school and the value placed on academics at school. Sarah, for example, expressed a keen desire to prepare early learners for grade one and she drew on cognitive theories to support her practice. Sarah's idea about continuity echoes discussions surrounding the research literature about transitions (e.g., Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani & Merali, 2007). Arnold et al. (2007) suggest "curriculum frameworks that [aim to] bridge pre-school and primary education strengthen pedagogical continuity" (p. 29). One risk associated to such a framework, however, is the



fear that ECEs will adopt a more “school-like approach” (Arnold et al., 2007, p. 29), which is the case in point for Sarah. For instance, in interpretive story #5, Sarah described learning as something that occurs when students sit before a teacher and the teacher instructs. She seemed to place more importance on formally teaching children the academic components of the curriculum.

The data suggests that some parents shared Sarah’s concerns about school readiness. The need to develop cognitive skills for school was a common thread across stories of practice. As a group the ECEs showed a desire to please parents who valued formal skills-based instruction over play – perhaps because the parents had been vocal about their values. Educators need to be confident in their practices to counter dominant stories such as this one. It is my belief that a critical reflective dialogue, such as the one I aim to provoke in my readers, will benefit ECEs who experience similar concerns expressed and discussed throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, the obstacles to enacting *play-based* pedagogies discussed in this chapter seem to lessen ECEs’ value of play.

My experiences as an ECE corroborate with some of the participants’ experiences. I too felt an obligation to follow a programmatic curriculum and pressures to treat literacy as a commodity. I wonder whether ECEs like Sarah and myself, devalue play as a result of pressures from an “audit society” (Power, 1997). Other participants, however, seemed to value play more than that of the academic components of their curriculum such as Erica. But as mentioned already, those ECEs who held a broader definition of literacy seemed to value play more than those ECEs who did not. Erica, for example, held a broader definition of literacy and as discussed in Chapter five, she seemed to have had more opportunities for reflection than the other participants. These

opportunities for critical reflection may be why Erica seemed more confident in her views about print literacy and play. It would appear to me that critical reflective practice gave Erica the confidence to counter dominant stories such as the pressures ECEs feel from an “audit society” (Power, 1997) to treat language and literacy as a commodity and the pressures they feel from programmatic curricula that favour skills-based instruction over children’s interests.

### **6.6 The Ways in Which Beliefs about Play Mediate Planning of Curricular Experiences**

A predominant idea discussed in Chapter five was that the ways in which and the extent to which ECEs mobilized their knowledge about play within their professional practices was aligned with the curricular approach at their centre and the ways in which their centre adopted the approach. Approaches such as *theme-based*, *Core Knowledge* and *Montessori* constricted the ways in which ECEs were able to incorporate play into literacy experiences for preschoolers. For example, programmatic curricular approaches that privilege academic knowledge over social competence, which is questioned by Vygotskian views that intrapersonal communication may be less important in learning than interpersonal communication (Wink & Putney 2002, p. 91), prevents ECEs from putting their own values and beliefs to practice. Another dominant story was that childcare settings were structured by the specific curricular approaches they adopted. These two predominant ideas denote that ECEs’ curricular decisions to incorporate play into literacy experiences for preschoolers were constrained by the structured approaches adopted by their childcare centres and by programmatic curricula that privileged skilled-based over *play-based* pedagogies. My findings corroborate with Einarisdottir’s (2014)

study, which found that ECEs' choices about pedagogical practices were constrained by structured curricula.

## 6.7 Implications

The major implication I drew from the data is the need for more professional development opportunities for critical reflection within private childcare settings. The literature I reviewed attests to the notion that an increase in professional development activities can improve the quality of ECEs' language and literacy related practices (Beauchat, 2009; Breffni, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2014; Ganey, 2010; Lynch, 2011; 2009; Miller, 2004; O'Leary et al., 2010; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). But since teacher quality is often evaluated in terms of the achievement of academic outcomes, there may be major implications for ECEs' survival as a professional group in an "audit society" (Power, 1997). Some professional development initiatives have also geared their focus to improving students' outcomes. But Swim and Isik-Ercan (2013) argue that "daily practices of early childhood educators, rather than outcomes, should be both the basis of analysis and the indicators of teacher growth" (p. 173).

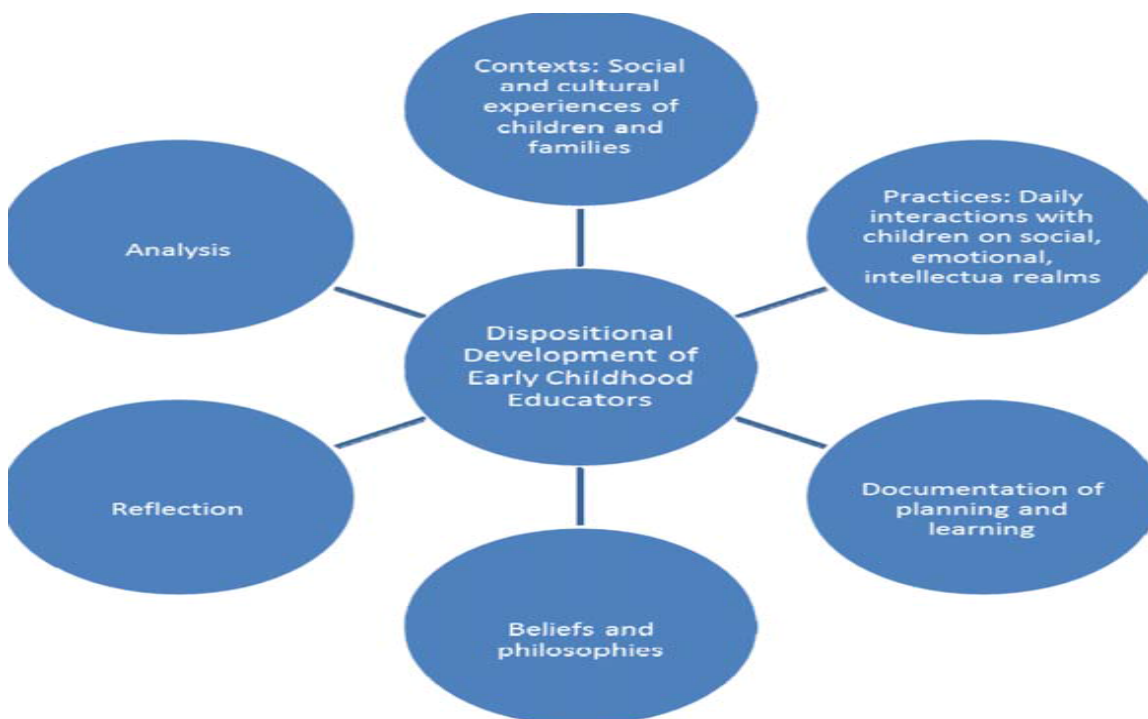
The stories of practice did not clearly reveal whether ECEs had enough opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue within their professional practices. However, there is compelling evidence in the ECEC literature that educators who work in highly structured childcare settings with *prescriptive* curricula did not alter their pedagogical practices after receiving professional development education that aimed to promote *play-based* pedagogies (Einarsdottir, 2014). Researchers have suggested that the efficacy of professional development courses that aim to alter educators' beliefs and practices is dependent upon individual choices and on characteristics of their work

environments (Hamre et al., 2012). Others found that professional development workshops alone are not an effective means to improve professional practice (e.g., Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010). Such findings made me question what kinds of professional development programs would help ECEs to actively draw on theories to develop praxis within a structured work environment.

Some researchers recommend that professional development initiatives should reflect real-life practical experiences (e.g., Herzenburg et al., 2005). Others express a strong need for critical reflection and reflexivity in order for there to be actual improvements in practice (e.g., Court et al., 2009; Gillentine, 2006; Heydon & Hibbert, 2010). Critical reflective practice focuses on real-life practice contexts and can afford educators opportunities to develop praxis.

Recent advice documents for educators in Ontario (e.g., OME, 2014) suggest that documentation is a catalyst for reflective practice. Swim and Isik-Ercan (2013) developed a framework for, what they call *dispositional development* that includes both documentation and reflection- among four other elements shown in figure 6.1- that aims to promote professional growth beyond a linear fashion. Swim and Isik-Ercan attribute attention to Duhn (2010) when positing that *dispositional development* “resist[s] the notion of continuous professional development as top-down and controlled through accountability” (p. 173). However, so far ECEs who work in public school settings are the ones who have the most opportunities with professional development and/or dispositional development initiatives. Changes in policies should make these opportunities available for all ECEs, not just those ECEs who work within the public school system.

Figure 6.1 The framework of dispositional development



*Source:* Swim and Isik-Ercan, 2013

For further study, I suggest an investigation into teacher inquiry through action research. Seeing as how action research is yet another vehicle that promotes reflective practice, it would be an effective means to explore the types of professional development and/or dispositional development that can actually help ECEs improve practices with print literacy and play, especially if they feel constrained by structured curricula, which is seemingly a prevailing issue within privatized ECE settings.

## 6.8 Concluding Remarks

Meier and Stremmel (2010) claim that narrative inquiry in ECE has potential to create change in ECEs' identities, beliefs, and practices by invoking emotion in both the inquirer and audience. I know that the writing of this thesis raised a number of issues for me and revealed barriers that prevent ECEs from actively using theory to develop praxis.

The stories of practice resonate with my own professional stories and I hope my inquiry will also resonate with readers and ignite critical dialogue. I hope that such a dialogue can lead to improvements in professional development programs and/or produce potential change in ECEs' current practice.

The stories of practice referenced throughout this thesis were catalysts for professional discourse. This observation alone demonstrates the benefits to offering more opportunities for reflective practice within the ECE profession, especially within private childcare setting and during a time of educational reform. It appears to me that there are more professional development opportunities for educators within public educational settings. But there should be an equal distribution of organizational commitment to reflection and comprehension of the *emergent* approach. Such commitment should not be related to scale.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Potential Interview Questions**

(1) Tell me about your literacy program (i.e., design, what theories does it draw on etc.)

The following are some ideas for follow-up probing questions:

(2) Tell me about the position you currently hold (include: duties, responsibilities, daily routines, and interactions with children and co-teachers/parents).

(3) Tell me a time when you observed play-based learning that involved reading or writing.

(4) What do you think of play-based learning? What is it? In your opinion, what are some advantages and disadvantages of play-based learning?

(5) In your opinion, can play support print literacy? If so, how?

(6) What different kinds of play activities occur in or outside of your classroom that you think can support children's print literacy skills?

(7) In your opinion, why do you think these types of activities support their print literacy development?

(8) What are your thoughts on the social aspect of play, in terms of how social interactions support children's print literacy skills?

(9) Have you ever experienced a time where your views about literacy-related teaching and learning conflicted with that of others? (i.e., with either your co-teachers, colleagues, pre-service field experiences, parents, or governmental policies). If so, how did you deal with situations like this?

(10) Tell me about how today's education system differs from or relates to your ECE experience as a child.

## APPENDIX B

### Participants' Personal Narratives

#### **Diana's Personal Narrative**

Upon completion of my degree in Early Childhood Education my first job was that of preschool teacher working in a inner city day care. The daily routine was pretty much as we had learned in school; arrival, morning activities, lunch, rest, afternoon activities and departure. Hide sight, when I look back on the issue of literacy, because I was more of an auditory and visual learning (watching actions) I related to the children that way. It was not until graduate school that I realized that I was virtually illiterate, further, it was not until Naz's research project did I ever really reflect on literacy with kids per se.

I only worked as a preschool teacher for a year and then became a supervisor of a school age day care in the inner city of Toronto; many of the children that I dealt with where from single female lead households, primarily from the West Indies. The focus at the time was to develop the day care and as the kids where in school literacy in the day care came to the fore in assisting to help with homework. During the summer holidays, activities where focused on field trips with the typical follow-up writing exercise about the type.

One of my strengths (possibility a compensatory process) was to describe in detail about an object or event. So, when working with children I am always describing sometimes in too much detail (I am only trying to help) in attempting to assist with children's reading and writing. For me, literacy has always been more about life than just reading and writing. For example, everyday events can lead to literacy. It is about context....reading a great Robert Munch book is great especially if you are a very animated reader or reading a book about a farm. However, there is no context for kids only the animated reader.

When I left the day care I went to Graduate school, it was there that I learned that I had major literacy issues. I did not realize how challenged I was and I had to work extremely hard to bring myself up to a level as that of my peers.

I moved further from the children and more into administration and at one point became a Program Advisor licensing childcare centres. It was here that I discovered there where others like me in that literacy was important but we had our own personal struggles. As my writing improved (to the point where I wrote editorials for the paper and people commented on how they wished they could write like me) I felt an obligation to help others.

As I moved along through my career, I started focusing more and more on administration and now legal aspects and consulting for a large childcare company that had 100 staff . . . . I soon came to realize that literacy (boarding on illiteracy) appeared to be systemic; this combined with the growing need for ECE staff to be concise with notes to the parents thereby mitigating risk.

I had started to review staff journals and was becoming more and more concerned about the writing as in many cases these graduates seemed to be more illiterate than I was when I started out.

I organized writing sessions for the staff. The majority of staff openly expressed that they did not see a need for this “training.” If there was going to be a study regarding literacy, a comparison between the literacy level of the ECE and literacy in the classrooms. Unfortunately today the context for ECE teachers and children is completely lacking. Milk comes from stores not from cows, strawberries, butter, fruit....everything comes from stores, ECE teachers and children do not know the context. From my personal and professional experience we learn quicker when whatever we are learning is put into context.

For example, I would take kids to the cemetery and we would actually do math; when was the person born, how old when they died, how much older were they then you.....some parents thought this strange. Remembrance Day, every year we talk about the heroes and show Flanders field ....but you don't want your child to take a trip to the cemetery? I am pretty much out of the box most of the time and the kids that I worked with will have stories that they can write about and have the richness of the story because they have the context.

### **Sarah's Personal Narrative**

After graduating with my Early Childhood Education diploma, I started working at a private school that is curriculum geared. Our philosophy is prepare the child for first grade by teaching them writing and reading skills. This is a very different philosophy than the one that we were taught as students at Seneca College.

In my junior kindergarten room we prepare children to recognize letters, numbers and shapes. We teach children how to write their names from the first day of school by encouraging them to write their names on their work. We work with each child daily and encourage parents at home to help their child recognize their name and write their name very early on. We have a new letter every week and do a craft that starts with that letter. Also every Friday the children bring in a treasure that begins with the letter we are working on during the week. We want children to be able to recognize the letters of the alphabet.

Very early on I realized that the children in our room loved writing their names and loved writing letters on paper asking me if it was right. We enrich the centre with opportunities that practice reading and encourage children to read what we have posted on the wall. I noticed a few weeks into the new school year that a child was playing on the carpet with magnet toys and he asked me which letter he had made. I looked up from the table and realized he made the letter “A.” I asked him to come to my table and we figured out together what letter he made and we tried to create more letters together. In that moment I realized how proud this child was to be able to recognize the letter that he had created.

As the school year progressed my co-teacher and I started sending home early reading books for the children to practice their reading with their families. Every Friday the books would go home and on Monday when the children would return we would ask them to read us the books. We not only help the children read the books to us, but we also

expect them to understand the story they just read by telling us what is happening in the story. We now see the love of reading in the children and the children ask us every Friday to send more than one book home.

Since we are curriculum based we can gear our literacy programs to reflect the children's ability and comprehension level. We always try to enhance literacy in our classroom to keep the children challenged and engaged in learning. We have weekly "Book Features" in the listening centre that allow children to read along with the books that they are listening too. We want to instill the love of books and literacy in the children at a young age.

### **Steph's Personal Narrative**

After I obtained my Early Childhood Education Diploma, I began to work at a private childcare centre. My current position is JK/SK Team Leader and Teacher. There are approximately thirty students with four teachers (teacher-student ratio of 1:10) in two classrooms. I work alternating weekly shifts Monday through Friday (7:00-3:30 and 9:30-6:00). This is my first RECE job after obtaining my ECE diploma!

During morning circle, the children and I sing good morning to one another and talk and sing about the date and weather. As we are singing the Days of the Week song, I (or a child) will point to the word in print as we sing through each day. A few children are selected to assist the teacher in identifying the correct day of the week flashcard to put on the calendar chart. Moreover, print literacy is all around our classroom – the full date and a daily schedule is written on the big white board, all the shelves and book/activity/school supply bins are labeled with a picture and the word in print (e.g., "Rulers," "Reading Level A," "Play Dough Tools"). There are also many resources and materials that promote literacy during free activity time in the morning and late afternoon (e.g., white boards, blackboards, black-dry erase boards, magnetic/felt letters, magnetic words, sight words games, play dough, sand, pipe cleaners, various activity sheets). Regarding the Language Arts curriculum, the children are exposed to various storybooks that target several literacy skills (e.g., rhyming, vocabulary, comprehension). The children are always asked to pay special attention to the title, author and illustrator of the book (e.g., looking at the author's photograph at the back and reading about his/her background). There are also a few rhymes and poems recite and master every month. Our parents work with their children at home by participating in the Ricky Raccoon Sight Words Program as well as the Reading from A-Z Program.

I currently teach a group of SKs who was with me last year in JK as well. When they moved up from Preschool into JK, they were just beginning to trace their name. They gradually learned how to print their own letters through practicing writing letters with their fingers in the air, forming letters with various materials (play dough, sand, pipe cleaners, their bodies), identifying the alphabet through various activities (finding a specific letter in a magazine, making a letter collage) and copying. It consisted of both recognizing the alphabet and developing fine motor skills to properly grip and print with a pencil. Now, they have mastered writing their first and last name, the full date, and read books independently at their own levels! They ask for their own copy of a poem so that they can follow along while I teach it. Upon reflection, I do find it challenging to deliver all language components to children (books, poems, songs, nursery rhymes, sight words,

reading, writing) with our current schedule (teaching all the other subjects). We are scheduled to teach Language Arts two times a week, but I always try to squeeze in a little literacy into the schedule every day. Nonetheless, kindergarten is my favourite age group to teach because their progression never ceases to amaze me!

### **Erica's Personal Narrative**

I graduated from Fanshawe College over 30 years ago with an ECE Diploma. While I always thought literacy and numeracy were important components of a childcare program my thoughts and philosophy on delivery have changed over the years. What hasn't changed is the necessity for literacy to be an integral part of any early learning program.

What is literacy? Does it only encompass books and reading? It is so much more than that. How we promote literacy in our programs will impact the children in our care for the rest of their lives. When I first graduated I did focus more on reading stories as the focal point of literacy in our program. However when I joined the staff at *this centre* in 1981, I realized that there is so much more to literacy than simply reading stories. I do not want to give the impression that reading stories is not important because it is very important and I always read many stories throughout the day, however there are many ways to expand on this. How we read stories to the children in our group is crucial, over exaggerating, using different voice tones; soft, loud, matching the tone to the words is essential in keeping everyone's attention and making the story come to life.

It is important to expose children to many different types of stories; reading books, telling stories using puppets/props, audio stories and felt stories. One of my favourite styles of books is books that are written to a song. One of my teaching partners was great at playing the piano and guitar. We would have sing a long circles where I would hold the book, turn the pages while she played. We had many favourite books such as Tingolaya, Baby Beluga, The Wheels on the Bus, Eency Weency Spider etc. etc. The children enjoyed this activity and remained focused for 30-40 min. at a time.

In our classrooms we also provide an area called: Feature Author. In this area we have books featuring one particular author and we talk about this author for a month. We discuss what an author is, what is an illustrator, where do we find books, the importance of books. We provide "The Feature Author" in all of our classrooms including the toddler rooms. The older children would start to write and illustrate their own stories, first they would dictate the words and the educator would print it for them and eventually they would print their own stories.

It is so important to provide many different activities that promote literacy and language. We include magazines in our books centres, factual books not just story books, keyboards in dramatic play as well as phone books. Our environments should be enriched with print. We accomplish this by labeling objects/furniture in the room, such as table, chair, sandbox, window, door, easel, books, puzzles, etc. Printing each child's name and accompany it with their photo is a great teaching tool in letter recognition.

The question is often raised, why bother and label items when children can't read. We have found and research supports this that it is never too early to introduce children to literacy. Children are quick to understand that letters form words and that there is a

beginning and ending to words. These are all pre-cursors to reading and writing skills. Early exposure to literacy is extremely beneficial to children.

A couple of years ago we have switched from a *theme-based* program to an emergent program. One comment I hear that is very disturbing is we don't read stories unless a child asks to have a story read, we don't sing songs, we don't do circles any more. Literacy, storytelling enriches a program and is crucial to the development of each child. For our centre, being emergent has allowed us even more creativity and we certainly read/tell many stories throughout the day. Encouraging and supporting language in our programs, providing an environment that is enriched with literacy is essential.

### **Nina's Personal Narrative**

My name is Nina, and I am an early childhood educator and have been in this field for 14 years. I have a passion and love to work with children.

I believe that children learn through play and they need to be able to express their feelings freely without any instruction. I highly believe in emerging curriculum, and the best way to implement it in the preschool classroom would be through documentation. Documentation invites us to be curious and wonder with others about the meaning of different events to children. We become co-learners together on children's expanding minds and understand the world as we interpret that understanding with others. During my preschool experiences with different age groups, it made me realize how deeply we can know each individual child by observing and documenting their thoughts and letting them express who they are individually.

When I first started working with preschool group, I noticed how teachers are cutting all the works for the children and this in my opinion was not what I believed. Everything was teacher oriented and based on theme and teacher's interest and not what the children actually wanted. For example when the children were busy coloring farm animals, they were talking about dinosaurs. As I continued to be in the classroom I noticed that the children are playing with the dinosaur figures and taking the books about dinosaurs and asking the teachers to read them. It was amazing how much information the children had about the dinosaurs and how much we learned from them. I tried to explain the teachers and teach them about the documentation based on observation. After a while the teachers got used to the documentation and it was so easy to do projects with our preschool group.

### **Penny's Personal Narrative**

I have been working in the field of early childhood education for almost 8 years now. I have worked with all age groups- toddlers to school-age children. Currently I am working with preschool, 8:30 – 5:30 everyday Monday-Friday. This is my favourite age group to work with because they are just learning to talk, tell me stories and they enjoy learning new things such as the alphabet, reading, writing, and they are beginning to express themselves through Art.

During a typical day in my classroom, children begin arriving between 8:45-9:00am, at 9:00am I usually do a small welcome circle, sing one or two songs discuss



topics of the day and read a story. At 9:15 the children have a French lesson, which consists of audio books in French, pictures, objects to associate with words in French and they sing a song in French. The children then participate in pre-writing/pre-reading worksheets in two groups of 8. They focus on a letter each week; tracing, writing, and recognizing that letter. They also have a monthly theme so some of the worksheets reflect the theme (ie- Farm theme, we trace names of the different animals and colour the matching picture, or colour by number a farm scene). The last week of every month we review all we have worked on. The older children (3-4 years) really enjoy matching word activities, they like to choose a picture and match the first letter to the picture (ie- letter D for dog). I used to just make the children to practice writing everyday, but they seemed less engaged in the writing sheets as the week went on. So I thought of other ways to practice literacy.

The children love audio books, especially when they have lots of sound effects in the background and they all get involved. Throughout the day the children usually don't take books to read, unless it is before naptime. They love to be read to.

## APPENDIX C

### Ethics Approval

**Western Education**  
**WESTERN UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**  
**USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS - ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE**

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Review Number: 1307-1  
Principal Investigator: Rosamund Stooke  
Student Name: Nazila Eisazadeh  
Title: *Exploring Preschool Educators' 'Funds of Knowledge' about Print Pedagogies Through the Narrative Lens*  
Expiry Date: August 31, 2014  
Type: M.Ed. Thesis  
Ethics Approval Date: August 7, 2013.  
Revision #:  
Documents Reviewed &  
Approved: Western Protocol, Letter of Information & Consent

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This is to notify you that the Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board (REB), which operates under the authority of the Western University Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the date noted above. The approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the REB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or information/consent documents may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB, except for minor administrative aspects. Participants must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation. Investigators must promptly report to the Chair of the Faculty Sub-REB any adverse or unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected, and any new information which may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study. In the event that any changes require a change in the information/consent documentation and/or recruitment advertisement, newly revised documents must be submitted to the Sub-REB for approval.

Dr. Alan Edmunds (Chair)

*2012-2013 Faculty of Education Sub-Research Ethics Board*

Dr. Alan Edmunds	Faculty of Education (Chair)
Dr. John Barnett	Faculty of Education
Dr. Wayne Martino	Faculty of Education
Dr. George Gadanidis	Faculty of Education
Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki	Faculty of Education
Dr. Julie Byrd Clark	Faculty of Education
Dr. Kari Veblen	Faculty of Music
Dr. Jason Brown	Faculty of Education
Dr. Susan Rodger	Faculty of Education, Associate Dean, Research ( <i>ex officio</i> )
Dr. Ruth Wright	Faculty of Music, Western Non-Medical Research Ethics Board ( <i>ex officio</i> )
Dr. Kevin Watson	Faculty of Music, Western Non-Medical Research Ethics Board ( <i>ex officio</i> )

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## APPENDIX D



**Western  
Education**

*Exploring Preschool Educators' Funds of Knowledge  
about Print Literacy Pedagogies: Through a Narrative  
Lens*

### LETTER OF INFORMATION

#### **Introduction**

My name is Nazila Eisazadeh and I am a M.Ed student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. I am currently conducting research into preschool educators' ideas about literacy pedagogy and would like to invite you to participate in this study.

#### **Purpose of the study**

The aims of this study are: (1) to understand ECEs' views about how to support young children's print literacy; (2) to understand ECEs' views about the role of play in print literacy development; and (3) to understand how ECEs form their understandings about literacy and the role played by play in literacy development.

#### **If you agree to participate**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in an interview that may take up to 30-60 minutes. The location of the interview will be one of your choosing and will be audio recorded and transcribed. After the interview is conducted, I will leave you with a personal story about my own beliefs about literacy, which will be approximately 1-2 pages in length. You will have 1-2 weeks to read it through and reflect on your own practice. I will then invite you to write and share your own written story about your beliefs regarding literacy pedagogies. Your stories can be between 1-2 pages in length. I will transcribe the interviews and share the transcript with you in order to obtain your feedback and confirm the accuracy of the information. You have the right to change or delete any part of the transcript. No information will be used in the research without your approval.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information that could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. I will use pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of your identity. The audio recordings of your interview will be immediately uploaded onto my computer, which is password protected and all audio recordings of your interview will be disposed of 5 years after publication date. During the interview process, I am to keep a reflective diary of my thoughts. My reflective diaries of the interview process will be shredded/ and disposed 5 years after publication date as well. Any and all information you provide will be kept for the duration of this study and will be disposed of 5 years after publication date.

**Risks & Benefits**

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, Western University at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [REDACTED] and my email is [REDACTED]. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Roz Stooke, at [REDACTED] Ext. [REDACTED] and her email is [REDACTED]. This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Nazila Eisazadeh

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*Exploring Preschool Educators' Funds of Knowledge  
about Print Literacy Pedagogies: Through a Narrative  
Lens*

*Nazila Eisazadeh  
Rosamund Stooke  
Kathy Hibbert*

CONSENT FORM

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: Nazila Eisazadeh

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### Curricular Approaches Referenced in Stories of Practice

**Theme-based:** a curricular approach that prescribes weekly or biweekly themes within a structured learning environment.

**Montessori:** an approach that emphasizes student's interests in a rigorously structured play environment and teaches students to develop skills that are individualized (Barone, 2010).

**Core Knowledge:** an approach that privileges knowledge gained from specific subjects such as English, History, Science, Mathematics, Arts and Physical Education and teaches these subjects separately (Kridel, 2010).

**Waldorf:** Leafgren (2010) explains that it is an approach that also teaches academic subjects but through a spiritual science perspective. For example, “Narratives written by each of the teachers replace letter grades, and lessons are taught through stories, conversations, and rich experiences rather than the use of textbooks” (p. 939).

**Project-based:** Schultz (2010) explains that it is “inquiry-based, outcome-oriented, and associated with conducting curriculum in real-world contexts that are related to naturalistic endeavors rather than focusing on curriculum that is relegated to book or rote learning and memorization” (p. 691). Projects are carried out as an entire group.

## Curriculum Vitae

**NAZILA EISAZADEH****EDUCATION**

Commencing 09/2014	<b>Ph.D</b> , Curriculum, Teaching and Learning (Language and Literacies Education), University of Toronto Supervisor: Dr. Shelley Staggs Peterson
2012-2014	<b>M.Ed</b> , Curriculum Studies, University of Western Ontario Supervisor: Dr. Rosamund Stooke
2011-2012	<b>Early Childhood Education Diploma</b> , Seneca College
2005-2009	<b>Bachelor of Arts with Honours</b> , English Literature, York University
2009	<b>TEFL Certificate</b> , Oxford Seminars

**HONOURS & AWARDS**

2014	Joan Pedersen Memorial Award, University of Western Ontario
2011-2012	Awarded Highest Academic Standing, Seneca College

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

2007-Present	<b>Academic Tutor</b> , Tutor Doctor, York Region, ON
2013-Present	<b>Early Childhood Educator</b> , Thornhill Nursery School and Kindergarten
07-08 2013	<b>ESL Teacher</b> , Splendor International Language Exchange Association, Taiwan
2011-2012	<b>Early Childhood Educator</b> , Kid's Can Doodle, Richmond Hill, ON
2009-2010	<b>ESL Teacher</b> , Kid's College, Seoul, South Korea
2008-2009	<b>ESL Teacher (Distance Education)</b> , Canada Sang Sang, Toronto, ON

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

06-Present 2014	<b>Research Fellowship</b> , University of Toronto, Toronto, ON Research area: Oral language and writing through play in northern communities
11-01 2012	<b>Research Administrator</b> , Stanford University, Tecumseh School, London, ON Research area: sight word acquisition with embedded pictures

05-10 2009

**Research Assistant**, York University, Toronto, ON

Research area: human behaviour and stress/anxiety levels through e-learning

## **PUBLICATIONS**

Eisazadeh, N., Stooke, R. (2013). The all about me book as a culturally responsive pedagogy. *Early Childhood Education*, 41(1), 30-35. Retrieved from <http://ecec.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/EarlyChildhoodEducationJournal2013Vol41No1.pdf>

## **MEMBERSHIPS & AFFILIATIONS**

2013-Present

College of Early Childhood Educators