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certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:**

**PLAY: A STUDY OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT  
A COMPLEX ELEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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A COMPLEX ELEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For my daughter, Charlotte

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# **PLAY: A STUDY OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT A COMPLEX ELEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

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Using one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, this basic qualitative study (see Merriam 1998) examined preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs. Research for this study focused on seven preservice teachers enrolled in an early childhood through grade four practicum course at a small private university in south central Texas. Using Nesper (1987) and Vygotsky (1986) as frameworks for transforming the collected data (see Wolcott, 1994), the findings of this study indicated that multiple influences—such as experiences before and during teacher education, feelings, ideals, and universal assumptions—worked in concert to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. And, these influences set the foundation for the content of the preservice teachers' beliefs. Specifically, for the preservice teachers, play seemed to have multiple meanings that fluctuated and were at times contradictory. These defining qualities suggested that the preservice teachers had not fully synthesized their beliefs about play.

This study's findings came about because two frameworks instead of one were used to describe, to analyze, and to interpret the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Together these frameworks provided insights into the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs that neither framework could have provided

alone. Specifically, the findings of this study reveal challenges and opportunities for early childhood teacher educators. On the one hand, the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions present within the preservice teachers' beliefs about play highlight the challenge of defining and conceptualizing play within teacher education. On the other hand, the broad set of influences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and their complex interrelationship suggest that by using multiple frameworks to explore preservice teachers' beliefs about play, by viewing preservice teachers' beliefs as an asset to their learning about it, by identifying the sources of preservice teachers' beliefs about play, and by engaging in one-on-one discussions with preservice teachers about their beliefs, teacher educators have the opportunity to address this complex element of early childhood education in their programs with the hopes of ultimately influencing their preservice teachers' practice.



## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	xiv
List of Figures .....	xv
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Overview and purpose of study .....	1
Definition of Terms.....	5
Early Childhood Education.....	5
Preservice Teachers .....	6
Beliefs .....	6
Play .....	7
Role of Play in the Classroom .....	7
Influences on Beliefs.....	9
Conclusion .....	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	12
Introduction.....	12
The Position of Play in Early Childhood Education.....	12
Historical Overview .....	12
Section Summary .....	17
Play: Theories and Definitions.....	18
Theories of Play .....	18
Four Approaches to Including Play in the Early Childhood Classroom .....	18
Nonplay approach. ....	18
Hands-off approach.....	19
Narrowly focused intervention approach.....	21
Broad-based developmental approach. ....	23
Critique of Prevalent Play Theories.....	26
Definitions of Play .....	29
Approaches to Defining Play .....	29
Critiques of Prevalent Definitions of Play .....	31

Section Summary .....	32
Preservice Teachers' Beliefs.....	33
Features of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs .....	33
Influences Outside of Teacher Education that Shape Preservice Teachers' Beliefs .....	34
Characteristics of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs.....	36
Influence of Teacher Education on Preservice Teachers' Beliefs .....	38
Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play.....	41
Challenges of Researching Beliefs .....	44
Defining Beliefs.....	44
Documenting Beliefs .....	46
Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Beliefs .....	46
Nespor's Framework for Beliefs.....	48
Vygotsky's Framework for Conceptual Development .....	50
Complementary Dimensions of Nespor's and Vygotsky's Frameworks.....	52
A Case for Complementary Frameworks .....	55
Section Summary .....	56
Conclusion .....	56
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	58
Introduction.....	58
Research Paradigm.....	59
Research Methodology .....	59
Sampling, Context and Participants.....	60
Hawkins University .....	60
Early Childhood Practicum Course .....	61
University-Based Component of Course .....	62
Field-Based Component of Course.....	65
Participants.....	69
Data Collection .....	71
Interview .....	71

Direct Observation .....	73
Document Analysis .....	74
Data Analysis .....	74
Overview: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation .....	74
Data Transformation Process .....	76
Quality and Rigor .....	78
Trustworthiness/Credibility .....	78
Dependability .....	80
Transferability .....	81
Confirmability .....	81
Ethical Considerations .....	81
Conclusion .....	83
Chapter 4: Findings .....	84
Introduction .....	84
Foundations of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play .....	84
Everyday and Classroom Experiences .....	85
Overview of Experiences .....	86
How Experiences Shaped the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play .....	89
Using incoming beliefs about play to evaluate classroom experiences .....	89
Using classroom experiences to alter and/or add to incoming beliefs about play .....	100
Summary: Everyday and Classroom Experiences .....	107
Beyond Experience: Affective and Evaluative Loading, Alternativity, and Existential Presumption .....	108
Overview of Influences .....	108
How Influences Shaped the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play .....	114
Facilitation of the memory process .....	115
Task definition .....	121
Summary: Beyond Experience .....	125
Section Conclusion: The Relationship Between the Foundation of Beliefs and Their Structure .....	126

Content of the Preservice Teacher’s Beliefs About Play.....	127
Non-Consensuality and the Multiple Meanings of Play.....	128
Overview of the Multiple Meanings of Play.....	128
Characteristics: Play is.....	131
Form: Play includes.....	137
Place: Play occurs.....	139
Individualized Meaning of Play.....	140
Sue’s definition of play.....	140
Variation in the categorization and characterization of play activities.....	145
Summary: Non-Consensuality and Multiple Meanings.....	148
Unboundedness: Fluctuating and Contradictory Beliefs About Play .....	149
Fluctuations.....	149
Jane: Surfacing beliefs about what constitutes play. ....	150
New and refined meanings of play. ....	154
Emphasizing certain meanings of play. ....	156
Summary: Fluctuations. ....	161
Contradictions.....	162
Play is child-determined and teacher-controlled.....	162
Play is enjoyable and unpleasant. ....	168
Play is valuable and unessential.....	171
Exploring contradictions.....	187
Summary: Contradictions. ....	188
Summary: Unboundedness: Fluctuations and Contradictions.....	189
Section Conclusion: Beliefs as a Developmental Milestone in Conceptualizing Play .....	189
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications .....	192
Introduction.....	192
Complementary Frameworks and Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs About Play .....	192
Implications for Research .....	198
Implications for Teacher Education.....	199
Challenges of Defining and Conceptualizing Play in Teacher Education.....	199
Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs About Play as an Asset to Learning About Play .....	202
Identifying the Multiple Influences That Shape Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs About Play .....	203

One-on-One Discussions as a Pedagogical Tool for Learning About Play ...	205
Conclusion: Limitations and Directions for Future Research.....	207
Appendix A: Self-Generated Items Categorized as Play, Not Play and Middle by the Preservice Teachers .....	212
Appendix B: List of 52 Items Categorized as Play, Not Play and Middle by the Preservice Teachers .....	214
Appendix C: Kate’s Categorized Activities List .....	216
Appendix D: Hypothetical Kindergarten Schedule .....	217
References.....	218
Vita .....	233

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Experiences Influencing Beliefs About Play .....	86
Table 2: Experience Listed by Degree of Influence on Beliefs .....	115
Table 3: Attributes Used to Describe Play.....	129
Table 4: Learning and Development Encouraged by Play .....	173
Table 5: Learning and Development Encouraged by Not Play .....	176

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Foundation of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs.....	53
Figure 2: Structure of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs .....	54

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

Preservice teachers' beliefs play a powerful role in shaping what and how they learn, and understanding these beliefs has implications for teacher education (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Yarnall, 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Accordingly, research in the field of education has addressed various topics on preservice teachers' beliefs, including (a) academic content areas, such as reading, writing, math, and science (Gill, Ashton, & Algina, 2004; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Linek et al., 1999; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001); (b) diversity (Araujo, 1996; Groulx, 2001; Paine, 1989); (c) teaching and learning (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Isikoglu, 2008; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002; Nettle, 1998; Smith, 1997; Weinstein, 1988, 1989) and (d) influences that shape beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Levin & He, 2008; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). However, preservice teachers' beliefs about play remain largely unaddressed despite the intricate role of play in early childhood education. Given that preservice teachers' beliefs may ultimately influence their practice (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Einarsdottir, 2001; Genishi et al., 2001; Kemple, 1996; Nespor, 1987; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000; Pajares, 1992; Stipek & Byler, 1997), uncovering preservice teachers' beliefs about play has been described as an important step towards effectively addressing play in teacher preparation (Klugman, 1996).



Today's teachers grapple with how to implement play in their classrooms. Some teachers use it as a tool for classroom management and a reward for completed work while others use it to support children's learning and development across different developmental domains (Fromberg, 2006; Goldstein, 2007; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). The diverse use of play in the classroom may arise, in part, from the tension between the gradually diminishing focus on play in early childhood classrooms on the one hand and the intrinsic value given to play by early childhood education stakeholders on the other hand.

Play has a long and involved history in early childhood education. A central element of the first kindergarten classrooms in Germany (Brosterman, 1997; Froebel, 1902), kindergarten in the United States initially held on tightly to its Froebelian roots (Fromberg, 2006; Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984). Overtime, however, early childhood education has undergone broad changes, such as the replacement of metaphysical philosophies with scientifically based approaches as the basis for curriculum decisions (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber 1984), and the inclusion of cognitive growth and academic content along with or in place of social and emotional growth and development in the curriculum (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984).

As early as the 1930's, kindergarten classrooms began shifting away from their play-based foundation towards more teacher-directed activities (Weber, 1984). This shift gained momentum in the late 1980's and early 1990's when schools began adding academic content to the early childhood curriculum, which resulted in less time for play (Elkind, 1990; Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Jeynes, 2006). More recently, Fromberg (2006), in her paper on the current status of kindergarten and early childhood teacher education, noted that the push for achievement on high stakes tests has forced some teachers to further focus on academic instruction at the expense of more child-centered and play-based teaching strategies. Although high stakes testing has led some early childhood professionals to move away from child-centered, play-based practices, Fromberg (2006) noted that teaching academic content and using child-centered, play-based practices are not mutually exclusive. Rather, educators can teach academic content through play-based teaching strategies.

Even within this changing context, there appears to be some agreement among early childhood education stakeholders that play has value (Bell, 1991; Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000; Kemple, 1996; Lee, 2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). For instance, growing out of empirical evidence suggesting that play may both reflect and encourage children's development and learning, early childhood educational organizations such as the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) encourage teachers to create environments, to provide materials, and to establish time for play in their daily routines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). And, although teachers use a variety of approaches to incorporate play in their classrooms, as a group they describe play as being valuable for young children (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Lee, 2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). In particular, they seem to believe that it either directly or indirectly supports children's learning and development (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Lee, 2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987).

Further complicating the role of play in early childhood education is the nature of the construct itself (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; McLane, Spielberger, & Klugman, 1996). Specifically, it is a commonly used term, but not a term that connotes a commonly accepted meaning (Klugman & Fasoli, 1995). Moreover, the theoretical perspectives underlying play represent divergent notions about the role of play in children's lives (Ailwood, 2003; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008)

The centrality of play in the inception of early childhood education and the value that play has within the field of early childhood education would seem to invite research into preservice teachers' beliefs about play; however, only one study has explored this topic. In the sole study addressing this issue, Klugman (1996) surveyed an incoming class of college freshmen (n=169), who described themselves as “interested in work with children” (p. 15), to determine their understanding of play. Findings indicated that participants entered their first year of college with childhood memories of play including playing with toys, playing outdoors, participating in recess, and engaging in pretend and constructive play. In addition, these students associated play with learning and development, in particular, social development. According to Klugman, the theme of social development appeared throughout respondents' survey answers. Specifically, they made connections between play and learning social skills and they emphasized playing in groups over playing alone.

Klugman's (1996) findings provide initial insights into college freshmen's beliefs about play; however, the results of his study have several limitations. First, the study itself is 12 years old. Students entering teacher preparation programs today were early childhood and elementary students themselves when the movement towards “earlier is better” (Elkind, 1990, p. 4) began. Thus, they represent a different generation than the one represented in Klugman's study. Second, although the participants in the study were pursuing education in the “human services” (p. 15), they were not exclusively preservice teachers; rather, they were interested in working with children in a variety of capacities, such as social work. Third, because of Klugman's research design, that is (a) his use of a survey as the single assessment tool and (b) his limited attention to strategies that increase a study's credibility—such as triangulating multiple data sources (Glesne, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998); participating in prolonged engagement in the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); engaging in persistent observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); member checking interpretations for accuracy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); and engaging in peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998; Moss, 1994)—the study has limited internal validity.

Given the paucity of research on preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the limitations of the sole study examining it, the purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences that shape those beliefs, with the expectation that such understanding might assist early childhood teacher educators in addressing this complex area of early childhood education in their preparation programs. Using one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, this basic qualitative study (see Merriam 1998) examined preservice teachers' beliefs about play by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in early childhood education?
  - a. What do preservice teachers believe constitutes play?
  - b. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in learning and development?
  - c. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the teacher's role in play?
2. What do the preservice teachers believe influenced their beliefs about play? And, how do these influences appear to have shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play?

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

To contextualize the chapters that follow, in this section I provide an overview of the working definitions used for key terms in this study. These concepts will be discussed in greater detail in the coming chapters. Here, I briefly define, in turn, (a) early childhood education, (b) preservice teachers, (c) beliefs, (d) play, (e) role of play in the classroom, and (f) influences on beliefs.

### **Early Childhood Education**

According to NAEYC, *early childhood education* refers to "...any group program in a center, school, or other facility that serves birth through age 8. Early childhood programs include child care centers, family child care homes, private and public preschools, kindergartens, and primary-grade schools" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p.

3). In this study, early childhood education focused on children in prekindergarten and kindergarten, in other words, children from ages 3 to 6 years.

### **Preservice Teachers**

NAEYC addresses three strands of preparation in early childhood education: associate degree programs, initial licensure programs, and advanced programs (NAEYC, 2001, 2002, 2003). First, individuals in associate degree programs “...are preparing for professional positions serving young children and their families” (NAEYC, 2003, p. 10) usually in a community college context. Second, individuals in initial licensure programs “are preparing for professional positions serving young children and families...in a four- or five-year higher education program” (NAEYC, 2001, p. 8). Third, individuals in advanced programs “are assumed to be building on prior professional preparation and preparing for *deepened* or *new* professional roles in early childhood education, through a master’s or doctoral program” (NAEYC, 2002, p. 7).

In this study, *preservice teachers* referred to those individuals preparing for initial licensure in a five-year higher education program. Specifically, I examined the beliefs about play of seven preservice teachers enrolled in an early childhood education practicum at Hawkins’ University,<sup>1</sup> a small liberal arts university in south central Texas. While all seven of the preservice teachers planned to complete one strand of Hawkins University’s five-year Master of Arts in Teaching program (i.e., early childhood through grade 4; grades 4 through 8; grades 8 through 12) and to pursue a career in teaching, only five of the seven preservice teachers planned to pursue careers working with children in early childhood education. Of the other two, one planned to teach in the upper elementary grades, and the other planned to teach in middle school.

### **Beliefs**

In this study, I used a working definition of *beliefs* (Richardson, 2003) that reflected the complementary frameworks used in this study, namely Nespor (1987) and Vygotsky (1986). Each of these frameworks is fully described in *Chapter 2: Literature*

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<sup>1</sup> All names and locations have been changed.

*Review*. Drawing on Green (1971), Richardson (2003) suggested that “beliefs are propositions that are accepted as true by the individual holding the belief, but they do not require epistemic warrant” (p. 3). In this regard, beliefs are personal and loosely-structured (Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986).

## **Play**

I used the three principles highlighted by Klugman & Fasoli (1995) to surface the preservice teachers’ individual definitions of play. First, Klugman & Fasoli suggested that although play is a commonly used term, its underlying meaning may vary from person to person. Second, they suggested that play is identified by certain underlying qualities. And third, they argued that play involves specific types of activities and behaviors.

During data collection, I focused on the types of activities that the preservice teachers described as play and the characteristics of these activities. As I analyzed the data, however, I found that three of the preservice teachers also seemed to define play by place, or where an activity occurred. Thus for the purposes of this study, *play* consisted of characteristics of play, forms of play, and places that play occurs.

## **Role of Play in the Classroom**

Because assumptions about teaching and learning are embedded within different conceptions of play, an examination of play theory involves a corollary discussion of theories of teaching and learning. To address these issues, in this study, I used four approaches—nonplay, hands-off, narrowly focused intervention and broad-based developmental—for defining the *role of play in the classroom* (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Because I describe each approach in greater detail in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, in this section I offer a brief description of each.

First, early childhood contexts using the nonplay approach, dichotomize between play and work (Trawick-Smith 2005, 2008). In these classrooms, children may engage in play once they have completed activities assigned by the teacher. This approach embeds the theory of behaviorism which emphasizes the role of the teacher in children’s learning

(Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). From this theoretical perspective, the teacher provides step by step instruction to children. In turn, the children, who are viewed as blank slates, demonstrate that they are learning by providing increasingly more economical and efficient responses to the teacher (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984).

Second, in early childhood classrooms adopting a hands-off approach, play creates a context for extended uninterrupted play (Trawick-Smith 2005, 2008). This approach embeds the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Erickson and focuses on children's social-emotional growth and development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Because adult involvement is believed to interfere with children's ability to express themselves, this approach discourages adults from participating in young children's play (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Trawick-Smith, 2005). Rather, adults are encouraged to provide children with materials, time and space to play independently, and to use play as an observational tool to better understand children and their internal conflicts (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Third, classrooms adopting the narrowly focused intervention approach emphasize particular play activities and their influence on learning and development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Underlying this approach is the Piagetian theory of cognitive development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Because Piaget viewed the construction of knowledge as an individual process, this approach encourages children's independent learning through interaction with their physical world (Weber, 1984). Thus, teachers play a more cursory role by only intervening to develop specific skills (File, 1995; Trawick-Smith, 2005). And, these interventions support but do not go beyond the child's current developmental stage (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; File 1995).

Finally, unlike the narrowly focused intervention approach which elevates certain forms of play over others, the broad-based developmental approach includes a variety of play materials and activities (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Moreover, this approach suggests that play encourages multiple forms of learning and development and emphasizes play's direct role in encouraging academic achievement (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Underlying this approach is the Vygotskian theory of cognitive development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008), which addresses play, changes in cognition,

and the role of language, culture and adult intervention on those changes. Interpreting Vygotsky's work, Bodrova and Leong (1996) have suggested that adult interaction plays an important role in children's learning and development. Thus, to promote growth in all developmental domains, adults are encouraged to participate broadly in children's play activities (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

### **Influences on Beliefs**

Using Nespor (1987) this study addressed four *influences* that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, namely, experiences (i.e. episodic storage), ideals (i.e. alternativity), feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loadings), and universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption). In addition, using Vygotsky (1986) the notion of experience was further refined to include two distinct types of experiences, *everyday experiences*, which occur "outside the context of explicit instruction" (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 270), and *classroom experiences*, which occur within the context of explicit instruction. Because I describe how these influences shape thinking in greater detail in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, in this section I offer a brief overview.

First, Nespor (1987) suggested that the four influences that shape beliefs work in concert. Specifically, he suggested that the affective and evaluative components of beliefs impact which experiences have the greatest influence on teacher's beliefs. And, he suggested that teachers draw upon all four influences when defining and framing tasks. This leads belief systems to be: (a) *non-consensual*, that is personal; and (b) *unbounded*, that is loosely structured (p. 321).

Second, Vygotsky (1986) described how everyday and classroom experiences lay the foundation for conceptual development. Specifically, he posited that everyday experiences lead to the development of *spontaneous concepts*, which he described as "situational, empirical, and practical" (p. 194), while classroom experiences lead to the development of *scientific concepts*, which he described as "conscious and deliberate" (p. 194). For Vygotsky, the structural differences between spontaneous and scientific concepts allow them to have a symbiotic relationship; namely spontaneous concepts work their way up through scientific concepts and scientific concepts work their way down



through spontaneous concepts. In addition to delineating between two types of concept formation, Vygotsky provided a detailed three phased continuum of conceptual development that included (a) *heaps*, in which an individual's understanding is random and arbitrary; (b) *complexes*, in which an individual's understanding is connected to direct experiences and is developing, but not fully synthesized; and (c) *concepts*, in which an individual's understanding is "abstract and logical" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 113).

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provided an overview of this study and its purpose, namely to provide a better understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences that shape those beliefs with the expectation that such understanding might assist early childhood teacher educators in addressing this complex area of early childhood education. In addition, I provided the study's research questions and an overview of the working definitions used for key terms in this study. The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. In *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, I describe the literature which framed this study including (a) play's history and current position in early childhood education, (b) theories and definitions of play, and (c) literature on preservice teachers' beliefs. In *Chapter 3: Research Design*, I describe the following elements which guided this study: (a) research paradigm; (b) research methodology; (c) sampling, context and participants; (d) data collection; (e) data analysis; (f) quality and rigor; and (g) ethical considerations. In *Chapter 4: Findings*, I combine Nespor's (1987) and Vygotsky's (1986) frameworks to present and discuss the findings of this study. Specifically, I address two main themes and their corollary subthemes. The first theme, *foundations of preservice teachers' beliefs about play*, addresses two subthemes (a) *everyday and classroom experiences* and (b) *beyond experience: affective evaluative loading, alternativity, and existential presumption*. The second theme, *content of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play*, addresses two subthemes (a) *non-consensuality and multiple meanings of play* and (b) *unboundedness: fluctuating and contradictory beliefs about play*. In *Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications*, I describe

the implications of these findings, the limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The limited literature on preservice teachers' beliefs about play necessitates a broader examination of literature on play and on preservice teachers' beliefs (Boote & Beile, 2005). For that reason, I use three categories of literature to frame this study: (a) play's history and current position in early childhood education, (b) theories and definitions of play, and (c) literature on preservice teachers' beliefs. In the first section, *The Position of Play in Early Childhood Education*, I provide a contextual backdrop for the study by describing the status of play historically and in schools today. In the second section, *Play: Theories and Definitions*, I examine and critique the multiple perspectives on play. In the final section, *Preservice Teachers' Beliefs*, I discuss features of preservice teachers' beliefs, revisit the single study on preservice teachers' beliefs about play, describe the challenges of researching beliefs, and provide a framework for investigating beliefs. In the following pages each set of literature is discussed in turn.

### **THE POSITION OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

#### **Historical Overview**

Until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, society dismissed the idea of educating young children (Brosterman, 1997). In 1837, Froebel, a German educator, interrupted the notion of young children as uneducable by establishing formal schooling for children under the age of seven (Brosterman, 1997; Goffin & Wilson, 2001). In his writing, Froebel (1902) emphasized early education's importance in general and the importance of play in particular; he stated, "...play at this time is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance...the plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life" (p. 55). To encourage children's "natural" unfolding, Froebel made play a central component of the kindergarten curriculum. He did not dichotomize between play and work; rather, he viewed play as children's work (Brosterman, 1997). According to Brosterman (1997),

“...play was fundamental to the success of kindergarten...[and] all of the kindergarten activities, the singing, dancing, gardening, storytelling, gifts, and occupations were play: it was the engine that propelled the system” (p. 33). Froebel’s kindergarten focused on the active child engaged in play, gardening and singing (Brosterman, 1997).

Since the introduction of Froebel’s kindergarten, early childhood education has undergone broad changes, such as the replacement of metaphysical philosophies with scientifically based approaches as the basis for curriculum decisions (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber 1984), and the inclusion of cognitive growth and academic content along with or in place of social and emotional development in the curriculum (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984). Even within this changing context, early childhood educational organizations such as the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) continue to emphasize the critical importance of play in children’s lives and education by including it in their policy statements. Specifically, these policy statements encourage teachers to create environments, to provide materials, and to establish time for play in their daily routines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

NAEYC’s and ACEI’s support for play has grown out of empirical evidence indicating that play may both reflect and encourage children’s development and learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). In particular, research suggests that play may support children’s social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, language and literacy development and learning (Dockett, 1998; Elias & Berk, 2002; Katch, 2001; Marsh, 1999; Parten, 1932; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Piaget, 1962; Reifel, 1984; Reifel & Greenfield, 1983; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990; Stone & Christie, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Johnson et al. (1999), although some individuals have raised questions about the validity of play research, the researchers suggest that “it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of play in development” (p. 28).

In line with the broader support for play in the field of early childhood education, some teacher educators have described how they organize course content to address play

in their programs (Feldman, 1996; Klein, 1996; Lakin, 1996). For instance, Feldman (1996) explored the strengths and limitations of his preservice teachers' field placements by examining whether and how each classroom incorporated play into the curriculum. In addition, Klein (1996) discussed the benefits of using case studies to support preservice teachers' understanding of play, concluding that "case-based teaching is an interactive, learner-centered approach that reflects developmental and constructivist principles of learning. The case method prepares students to think like professionals, understand the complex nature of play, and become effective teachers of young children" (p. 66). And, finally, Lakin (1996) explored the multiple perspectives from which teacher educators in her program attempted to address play in their coursework, such as providing opportunities for preservice teachers to see first hand (a) the connection between play and art, (b) the role of play in the emergent curriculum, (c) the role of play in the community, and (d) the multi-ethnic contexts in which play occurs.

Beyond teacher educators' descriptions of how they address play in their coursework (Feldman, 1996; Klein, 1996; Lakin, 1996), research has also examined the extent to which play is addressed generally in teacher preparation programs (Glaubman, 1990; Kemple, 1996; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). For instance, in a survey of 120 U.S and Israeli kindergarten teachers, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) found that during teacher preparation none of the participants had received training in the facilitation, development, assessment, or evaluation of children's sociodramatic play. In addition, Glaubman's (1990) survey of 22 Israeli teacher educators indicated that nearly 80% of them provided only minimal instruction about play in their college courses. Furthermore, Bowman (1990)—in her review of university catalogues, certification requirements, early childhood standards, and professional journals—found that even when play was addressed in teacher education programs it was often covered superficially through a brief acknowledgement of prevailing theories that lacked meaningful connection to practice.

Even though early childhood teachers may not receive a significant amount of training on play, as a group they seem to value children's play (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Lee,

2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). For instance, Lee's (2006) study of 18 preschool teachers' perspectives on teacher-directed versus child-directed practices in the early childhood classroom found that 78% of the teachers "endorsed classroom practices that promoted children's play and encouraged active exploration and discoveries" (p. 436). Moreover, teachers across these studies seem to believe that play provides children with experiences that support multiple forms of learning and development (Bennett et al., 1997; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Lee, 2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004).

Although early childhood stakeholders value play and empirical evidence suggests that play supports children's learning and development, play has been slowly losing its prominence in the early childhood classroom (Elkind, 1990; Fromberg, 2006; Frost, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Weber, 1984). Introduced first in 1856 by Margarethe Schurz in Wisconsin and later in 1860 by Elizabeth Peabody in Boston, kindergarten in the United States initially held on tightly to its Froebelian roots (Fromberg, 2006; Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984). These early childhood classrooms, which were concerned with children's moral, social, and emotional development, focused on play and children's self-activity (Weber, 1984).

As early as the 1930's, however, kindergarten classrooms began shifting away from their play-based foundation towards more teacher-directed activities (Weber, 1984). This shift gained momentum in the late 1980's and early 1990's when schools began adding academic content to the early childhood curriculum, which resulted in less time for play (Elkind, 1990; Hatch & Freeman, 1988, Jeynes, 2006). Highlighting play's decline, Hatch and Freeman (1988), using ethnographic interviews with 12 kindergarten teachers, 12 principals, and 12 administrators, found that kindergarten practices had become more academic with an increased focus on direct instruction and paper-pencil tasks. Although not all of the teachers supported these practices, some felt compelled to adopt them in order to meet state educational standards. Nine years later, through interviews of 60 early childhood teachers and observations of those teachers' classrooms, Stipek and Byler (1997) uncovered a similar finding, that is, teachers who were unable to enact child-centered, play-based practices felt pressure from outside sources (e.g. state

standards, administrators, and parents) to create more didactic and academically-oriented classrooms.

More recently, Fromberg (2006), in her paper on the current status of kindergarten and early childhood teacher education, noted that the push for achievement on high stakes tests has forced some teachers to further focus on academic instruction at the expense of more child-centered and play-based teaching strategies. Scott-Little, Kagan, and Frelow's (2006) "content analysis of 46 learning standards documents developed by state level organizations" (p. 153) seems to support Fromberg's (2006) conclusion. Specifically, their findings indicate that "the cognition and general knowledge domain has been emphasized more than the other domains" (p. 166). On the state level, in Texas where this study took place, the current prekindergarten and kindergarten state curriculum also seem to emphasize cognitive growth and development. For instance, over half of Texas' *Prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* (TEA, 1999) and three-fourths of the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Kindergarten* (TEA, 1997) are dedicated to academic content areas, such as language arts, math, science and social studies. Both documents only briefly acknowledge the role of children's play in supporting children's learning and development. With regard to the *Prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines*, the authors devote one paragraph of the 23 page document to children's dramatic play, while the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Kindergarten* only addresses play in terms of its connection to literacy (e.g. dramatizing stories), theater arts, and music.

Although high stakes testing has led some early childhood professionals to move away from child-centered, play-based practices, Fromberg (2006) noted that teaching academic content and using child-centered, play-based practices are not mutually exclusive. Rather, educators can teach academic content through play-based teaching strategies. Doing so not only allows young children to learn academic content in a rich authentic fashion, but (also) to have "a significant influence on children's achievement of social competence, conceptual learning, and connection-making" (Fromberg, 2006, p. 82). With an eye on both the increased focus on academics in early childhood education and the importance of play in young children's lives, the most recent version of the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice Statement* positions play within the context of

enhancing academic achievement rather than being separate from it (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Recent studies examining teachers' attempts to implement play in contexts focused on academic achievement have demonstrated the different manners in which teachers grapple with curricular expectations (Goldstein, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007). For instance, Goldstein (2007), in her qualitative case study of how two kindergarten teachers implemented developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms, found that even with the increased focus on academic achievement required by the state-mandated curriculum, both teachers maintained their commitment to play and developmentally appropriate practice in their classrooms. In a second instance, Ranz-Smith (2007), in her study of four first grade teachers' play practices, found that although all four teachers valued play, they each cited curricular expectations as a barrier to implementing it in their classrooms. And, the teachers seemed to respond to this constraint in different manners. Specifically, two of the teachers seemed to grapple with this tension by "shrug [ging] off the demands as just part of the teaching scene" (p. 287), while the other two teachers seemed to grapple with this tension by marginalizing the use of play in their classrooms.

### **Section Summary**

In this section, I provided a contextual backdrop for this study by describing the status of play historically and in schools today. Although play is valued by early childhood education stakeholders, its role in the classroom has evolved over early childhood education's 200 year history (Elkind, 1990; Fromberg, 2006; Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984). Moreover, how teachers implement play in their classroom varies (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). These variations not only demonstrate how individual teachers respond to the tensions of implementing play in increasingly academically-oriented contexts, but (also) the different perspectives underlying play in the early childhood classroom. In the next section, I examine these multiple viewpoints.



## **PLAY: THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS**

A large body of theoretical work underlies the history of play and of play practices in the early childhood classroom (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Complicating these theories are multiple definitions of play. In this section, I discuss and critique these varying perspectives.

### **Theories of Play**

By highlighting play's role in children's learning and development, theorists have created multiple lenses for understanding and interpreting children's play (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Also, because assumptions about teaching and learning are embedded within different conceptions of play, an examination of play theory involves a corollary discussion of theories of teaching and learning embedded within them. To address these issues, in the first section I use four approaches for incorporating play into early childhood classrooms (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008) as a framework for discussing the multiple lenses used to understand and implement children's play in those contexts. In the second section, I offer a critique of the play theories embedded within these approaches.

### ***Four Approaches to Including Play in the Early Childhood Classroom***

Although teachers seem to value play, how they implement play in their classrooms varies (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Keating et al., 2000; Kemple, 1996; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987). Accounting for these variations in practice, Trawick-Smith (2005, 2008) outlined four approaches teachers use to implement play in early childhood contexts, namely, *nonplay*, *hands-off*, *narrowly focused intervention*, and *broad-based developmental*. Each approach embeds different theoretical perspectives on play, teaching and learning.

#### **Nonplay approach.**

Classrooms adopting a nonplay approach dichotomize play and work (Trawick-Smith 2005, 2008). In these classrooms, children may engage in play once they have

completed activities assigned by the teacher. This approach embeds the theory of behaviorism which emphasizes the role of the teacher in children's learning (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). From this theoretical perspective, the teacher provides step by step instruction to children. In turn, the children, who are viewed as blank slates, demonstrate that they are learning by providing increasingly more economical and efficient responses to the teacher (Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Weber, 1984).

With the nonplay approach, play has a tangential instead of a central role in the curriculum. Moreover, play serves a practical function by keeping children busy so that teachers can work with other children. Highlighting this approach, interview data from Keating et al.'s (2000) study of 10 early childhood classrooms in England suggests that teachers used play both as a reward for completed work and as a tool for managing the classroom while they met with children in small groups. In a parallel finding, Riojas-Cortez and Flores' (2004) survey results demonstrate that a portion of the 136 Mexican American bilingual early childhood teachers who participated in the study viewed play as a reward, although at significantly lower levels than Mexican American parents with children placed in bilingual classrooms. Thus, in the nonplay approach, the value of play does not lie in the play activity itself; but rather, in its ability to support teacher-directed activities. In this regard, play indirectly supports children's learning and development. Specifically, used as a motivational tool or as a classroom management tool, play supports the teachers' learning objectives by acting as an incentive for children to complete their "work" and by providing time for the teacher to meet with small groups of students to teach them the required curriculum.

#### **Hands-off approach.**

In early childhood classrooms adopting a hands-off approach, play creates a context for extended uninterrupted play (Trawick-Smith 2005, 2008). This approach embeds the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Erickson and focuses on children's emotional growth and development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Emphasizing the affective aspects of play, psychoanalytic theory positions play as a tool for emotional development and as a medium for children to cope with difficult experiences and to work

out their problems (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Predicated on the need for resolving internal conflicts arising out of childhood experiences, this perspective of play suggests that learning is an individual endeavor (Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Weber, 1984). Because adult involvement interferes with children's ability to express themselves, this approach discourages adults from participating in young children's play (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Trawick-Smith, 2005). Rather, adults are encouraged to provide children with materials, time and space to play independently; and to observe children's play so that they may better understand those children and their internal conflicts (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Research on teachers' beliefs about and practices with play suggest that some teachers support the teacher's role offered by this approach. Specifically, some teachers seem to believe they should create a context for children's play, but not directly participate in it (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Kemple, 1996; Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). For instance, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) surveyed 120 preschool teachers in Israel and the United States. All study participants maintained a housekeeping corner in their classroom, indicating their support for sociodramatic play. Fifty percent of the teachers, however, believed adults should not interact with children during sociodramatic play. Their findings mirror those of Kemple (1996) who determined that (a) teachers used few interventions during sociodramatic play, (b) their chosen interventions focused on creating a context for play as opposed to interacting with children during play, and (c) only a small percentage of teachers joined in play or talked about play themes with their students. Additionally, Bennett et al. (1997) stated that several teachers identified "providing 'a stimulating environment' and ensuring that 'there's a balance and a variety in all the activities that are on offer'...as key aspects of their role" (p. 37).

Although teachers seem to support the teaching role offered by this approach, few seem to emphasize its underlying theoretical perspective which focuses on emotional development alone (Bell, 1991; Smilansky, 1990). In one of the few studies in which teachers supported the underlying theoretical perspective of this approach, the findings of Bell's (1991) interview and observation study of six early childhood teachers indicated

that when describing the functions of play the teachers emphasized “children[‘s] need to ‘play out’ their experiences without adult intervention” (p. 15). Unlike the teachers in Bell’s study, teachers in general appear to suggest a broader connection between play and learning and development rather than emphasizing emotional development alone (Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Kemple, 1996; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004). Thus, although the hands-off approach closely aligns with the model of play historically encouraged in early childhood education (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008), more recent studies on teachers’ beliefs about and practices with play seem to suggest that they only support portions of it, namely the limited role of the teacher.

#### **Narrowly focused intervention approach.**

Classrooms adopting the narrowly focused intervention approach emphasize particular play activities and their influence on learning and development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Underlying this approach is the Piagetian theory of cognitive development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). For Piaget (1962), children’s play mirrored their cognitive developmental level. From this perspective, development is fixed and occurs through invariant stages. The passage from stage to stage is characterized by the development of new cognitive structures. According to Weber (1984), these developmental stages include: (a) the sensorimotor stage (birth through age 2), (b) the preoperational substage (age 2 through ages 7 or 8) of the concrete stage (age 7 through ages 11 or 12), and (c) the formal operations stage (ages 11 or 12). Each stage represents a different organization of experience, information, and knowledge that leads to different views of the world (Weber, 1984). Moreover, children’s language and socio-moral development evolve in lock-step with each of these cognitive phases (Piaget, 1923; Weber, 1984).

From the Piagetian perspective, just as children’s thinking becomes more complex so too does their play. For instance, during the sensorimotor period children engage in functional play, such as a child playing with different vocal sounds (Piaget, 1962). During the preoperational period children engage in symbolic and constructive

play (Piaget, 1962). According to Nicolopoulou (1991), children begin the preoperational period by engaging in solitary symbolic play and as they progress through the stage, they engage in more complex sociodramatic play. Finally, during the concrete period, children begin to engage in games with rules (Piaget, 1962). The latter type of play continues throughout one's life, such as in "sports, cards, [and] chess" (Piaget, 1962, p. 142).

Piaget's perspective on play development aligns with Parten (1932) whose eight month empirical investigation of preschool children's social relationships led to the development of a social play hierarchy. Specifically, she outlined six categories for children's social interaction including—*uninvolved*, *onlooker*, *solitary*, *parallel*, *associative*, and *cooperative*. After observing the children and developing these categories, she analyzed the frequency with which children at this age engaged in each social level. She found that most children in her study engaged in parallel play, and that age was correlated with the complexity of children's interactions. Similar to Piaget's (1962) position that play becomes increasingly complex as children develop, Parten (1932) suggested that as children age they engage in more complex social relationships, for example, *cooperative play* in which the players have a shared purpose.

Because Piaget viewed the construction of knowledge as an individual process, this approach encourages children's independent learning through interaction with their physical world (Weber, 1984). Thus, teachers play a more cursory role by only intervening to develop specific skills (File, 1995; Trawick-Smith, 2005). And, these interventions support but do not go beyond the child's current developmental stage (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; File 1995).

Like the hands-off approach, the limited role of the teacher in this approach seems to resonate with some practicing teachers (Bennett et al., 1997; Einarsdottir, 2002; Smilansky, 1990). For instance, while half of the 120 preschool teachers Smilansky (1990) surveyed believed that teachers should not intervene in play, 20% of the teachers suggested that "teachers should help and intervene in order to facilitate and develop [dramatic and sociodramatic] play abilities" (p. 38). In addition, the two Icelandic teachers in the Einarsdottir's (2002) study both suggested they would intervene in low quality play to improve it. Furthermore, two of the nine teachers in Bennett et al.'s (1997)

study of teachers' play theories and practice suggested that they deliberately interacted in children's play to enhance its quality.

In line with this approach, which emphasizes certain forms of play over others, some practicing teachers have been found to emphasize certain play activities in their own classrooms, such as sociodramatic play or games (Kemple, 1996; Ranz-Smith, 2007). For instance, the 11 kindergarten and 12 preschool teachers in Kemple's (1996) survey and interview study all "espoused a strong belief in the importance of sociodramatic play" (p. 26). In addition, Ranz-Smith (2007) found that one of the four teachers in her study emphasized games as a pedagogical tool for educating children in her classroom. Thus, aspects of this approach seem to resonate with some practicing teachers.

#### **Broad-based developmental approach.**

Unlike the narrowly focused intervention approach which elevates certain forms of play over others, the broad-based developmental approach includes a variety of play materials and activities (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Moreover, this approach suggests that play encourages multiple forms of learning and development and emphasizes play's direct role in encouraging academic achievement (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Underlying this approach is the Vygotskian theory of cognitive development (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008), which addresses play, changes in cognition, and the role of language, culture and adult intervention in those changes.

With respect to play, Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as encouraging development. This perspective contrasted with Piaget (1962) who viewed play as a reflection of development. Specifically, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that play creates a *zone of proximal development* in which children participate in real-world activities that would normally be too difficult for them, such as pretending to cut bread with a sharp knife. Similar to Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as becoming more complex over time. Initially, children's play reflects the daily activities in their life, such as pretending to wash dishes. In addition, because of their difficulty with abstract thinking, Vygotsky suggested that children use *pivots*—such as using a stick to represent a horse—to release

themselves from the “real-world.” Eventually, as children age, their play becomes more purposeful and rule-oriented.

Like Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978) viewed children as actively constructing knowledge. Vygotsky, however, differed from Piaget in that he viewed the construction of knowledge as a social and not an individual process. Bodrova and Leong (1996) suggested that Vygotsky viewed social interaction as not only influencing the content of knowledge but thinking itself. From this perspective, culture and language have a central role in development (Bodrova & Leong, 1996).

The notion that language and culture influence development aligns with play theories suggesting roles for each. In terms of the communicative aspects of play, Garvey’s and Bateson’s work suggests that individuals use various forms of communication to indicate whether or not they are engaged in play (Bateson, 1972; Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Specifically, Bateson (1972) suggested that play occurs when the meaning of the actions being engaged in do not stand for their usual meaning (Frost et al., 2005; Reifel & Yeatman, 1993), a proposition that he illustrated through animal’s play stating that “the playful nip denotes a bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (Bateson, 1972, p. 180). Although the action of “play biting” is similar to the action of “real biting,” the underlying meanings are different. According to Frost et al. (2005, 2008), moving in and out of play frames allows children to prepare for moving in and out of the many roles they will play in their life.

In addition to Bateson (1972), Garvey developed categories for analyzing the types of communication children use to move in and out of play frames (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). These communication techniques include (a) *preparatory talk*, language used to set the stage for a play scene; (b) *explicit directions*, outside of play language used to tell players exactly what they should do during the play episode; (c) *within play talk*, language used by children to give directions or to describe the play while in the act of playing; (d) *negation of play*, language used to disengage from play; and (e) *play signals*, for instance, giggles, pointing, etc. (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Each type of communication reflects the unique way children use language during play.

With regard to the cultural aspects of play, although children around the world may play, how they play often looks and sounds different (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). For instance, Riojas-Cortez (2001) found that Mexican American preschool children demonstrate their unique funds of knowledge through their pretend play. Developed by Moll and González (2004) to counteract the notion of deficit thinking, the funds of knowledge approach moves away from viewing families as a liability and positions them as an intellectual resource. Thus, the findings of Riojas-Cortez (2001) suggest that children express important aspects of their culture through play. In a second instance, Farver and Shin (1997) examined the pretend play of Korean-American and Anglo-American children. They found that Korean-American children engaged in less pretend play than their Anglo-American counterparts and that when they engaged in pretend play Korean-American children tended to use more family-based themes and also tended to ask questions, make polite requests, and describe the play of their partners. In contrast, Anglo-American children created danger-based and fantasy-based play episodes and tended to give explicit directions to their play partners and to talk about their own play. Thus, in these instances, children's culture seemed to influence how they played.

In addition to the role of culture and language in development, Vygotsky's work also emphasized the importance of social interaction during learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Interpreting Vygotsky's work, Bodrova and Leong (1996) suggested that adult interaction plays an important role in children's learning and development. Thus, to encourage growth in all developmental domains, adults are encouraged to participate broadly in children's play activities (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Perhaps because this approach may be used "to address state and national academic standards more directly" (Trawick-Smith, 2005, p. 222), two more recent studies on teachers' beliefs and practices seem to emphasize this approach (Goldstein, 2007; Moon & Reifel, 2008). For instance, Goldstein (2007) described how one of the kindergarten teachers in her study, Ann, "was able to integrate the [state] standards into open-ended, play-based activities that allowed her students to engage with the concepts presented in the standards on an individually appropriate level" (p. 36). Specifically, this teacher used an open-ended math game to address state math standards. While some of



the children followed the rules of the game and built hexagons, other children extended or altered the game to fit their individual developmental needs. In all cases, however, the game led the children to a new understanding of geometric concepts.

In a second instance, Moon & Reifel (2008) found that the public prekindergarten teacher in their study, Ms. Joyce, took on multiple teaching roles and used a variety of play activities. Believing that play encourages learning and development, Ms. Joyce incorporated games, dramatic play, story drama, spontaneous play, and block play into her classroom. In addition, Ms. Joyce positioned herself as an active participant in children's play. According to Moon & Reifel, "she knew how to scaffold ESL children's literacy development through play. In the beginning, she modeled it with step-by-step guidance, and later, she reduced her scaffolding and played with children as a parallel player" (p. 56). Here, Ms. Joyce's practice seems to reflect Bodrova and Leong's (1996) suggestion that adult interaction during play supports children's learning and development.

Each of the four approaches described in this section highlight the multiple lenses used for understanding and implementing children's play in the early childhood classroom (Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Although common, the perspectives within these approaches have limitations. In the next section, I offer a critique of the underlying theories of these approaches.

### ***Critique of Prevalent Play Theories***

In the four previously described approaches (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008), play either had an indirect role in encouraging learning and development (i.e. nonplay approach), or it was its central function (i.e. hands-off, narrowly focused intervention, broad-based developmental). These two perspectives represent prevalent theories of play. First, the nonplay approach highlights the work/play dichotomy (Ailwood, 2003; Cannella, 2002). This perspective marginalizes play by positioning it as an unessential activity engaged in by children alone (Ailwood, 2003; Cannella, 2002). In line with this critique, in nonplay classrooms, play has a tangential instead of a central role in the curriculum. Specifically, it is used as a reward when children's "real" work has been

completed or as a distraction so that teachers can meet with small groups of students (Keating et al., 2000; Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

With regard to the three approaches that position learning and development as a central function of play, evident across the studies on teachers' beliefs and practices is the notion that play encourages some form of development (Bennett et al., 1997; Goldstein, 2007; Kemple, 1996; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004). For instance, using a three-stage qualitative study, which included narratives, focus groups, individual interviews, and videotapes of practice, Bennett et al. (1997) studied the beliefs and practices of nine early childhood teachers from England. They found that these teachers viewed play as "a vehicle for learning" and believed that play provided "relevant and meaningful experiences...[that]...lead to learning" and fostered "positive attitudes towards learning" (p. 33). Notably, Bennett et al. purposefully selected teachers who had been identified as actively incorporating play into their practice which may explain their shared viewpoint.

Ailwood (2003) described the emphasis on the play/development connection as the *developmental discourse of play*; and suggested that it highlights the dominance of the psychological theories of Piaget and Vygotsky in early childhood education. Moreover, she noted that it decontextualizes play and play activities. According to Ailwood, from this perspective, play "occurs in a social and contextual vacuum. Within this vacuum, the rational child unfolds individually on the developmental journey to finite adulthood" (p. 290).

Echoing Ailwood (2003), Sutton-Smith (1997), in his cross-disciplinary review of play, described the play/development connection as the *Rhetoric of Progress*, that is, the notion of play as a vehicle for children's adaptation and development rather than as a pleasurable activity for both young and old alike. He concluded that although play theories "disagree about the specific kinds of development that are instigated by play, they all assume that play does indeed transfer to some other kinds of progress that are not in themselves forms of play" (p. 51). Furthermore, he cautioned that findings from studies correlating play with development may be flawed due to poor research design or to other external influences.

Christie's (1983) study, which examined the interplay between the benefits of engaging in sociodramatic play and those that come through teacher intervention, supports Sutton-Smith's (1997) assertion about the effects of external influences on play. Christie (1983) studied the effects of adult intervention on play quality, verbal intelligence, and creativity. After randomly selecting 20 preschool aged children, he placed them into either a play tutoring group or a skills tutoring group. The play tutoring group received the combined play interventions used by Smilansky (1968), while the skills tutoring group received instruction on "end product activities" such as making puppets or playing games (Christie, 1983, p. 328). Christie found that children in both groups improved on verbal intelligence and creativity measures, thus suggesting that what accounted for these gains lay in the adult interaction rather than engaging in play itself.

In a response to Sutton-Smith's (1997) rhetorics, Samaras (1999) raised questions about Sutton-Smith's notion of validity and his use of broad generalizations to substantiate his claims. In terms of validity, Samaras (1999) stated that in addition to Sutton-Smith's focus on internal and external validity, researchers must consider ecological validity, that is, its "usefulness to children, teachers, and parents" (p. 182). In addition, she argued that Sutton-Smith's generalizations about the disconnect between adult intervention in children's activities and their future school achievement weakened Sutton-Smith's position. Samaras stated, "Although all play may not lead to cognitive growth, it is difficult to deny that play can serve that function" (p. 183).

In addition to the concerns raised by Samaras (1999), Fein (1999) questioned whether Sutton-Smith's (1997) categorization of children's play as a rhetoric of progress fit her vision of classroom play, which highlighted action, autonomy, engagement, intrigue, and cooperation. In line with both Fein (1999) and Sutton-Smith (1997), Reifel (1999) argued that practitioners neither need to wholly accept nor reject Sutton-Smith's rhetorics; but rather, they could use his work as a model for scholarship while acknowledging the unique aspects of classroom play in their research. Reifel (1999) suggested that by considering the multiple meanings offered by Sutton-Smith (1997)

within the context of the classroom the early childhood profession could have a rhetoric of its own.

Although tension exists among the various perspectives on play, there appears to be some agreement that play has value. For teachers using the nonplay approach, play's value lies in its indirect support of the teacher's curriculum objectives. For teachers using the hands-off, narrowly focused intervention, and broad-based developmental approaches, play's value lies in its direct support of children's learning and development. Even Sutton-Smith (1997), who problematized the developmental functions often ascribed to children's play, acknowledged the value of play might lie in "...the joy of playing, the associated joy of living, the increases in enjoying one's own play skills, and the play interests and associations that naturally follow" (p. 45). Thus, play's value may be the tie that binds these divergent perspectives on play together.

### **Definitions of Play**

Against this theoretical backdrop, early childhood education stakeholders have grappled with how to define the term *play* (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; McLane et al., 1996). As McLane et al. (1996) noted, play is "...an elusive phenomenon that has been much studied but is still incompletely understood" (p. 5). To flesh out the multiple definitions of play, in the remainder of this section I examine common approaches to defining play and I offer a critique of these approaches.

### ***Approaches to Defining Play***

The absence of a clear definition of play may be due to the variety of approaches used to define the term itself (Klugman & Fasoli, 1995). Two common approaches include using characteristics to define play and using types of behavior to define play (Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Rubin et al., 1983; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). In terms of play characteristics, some commonly referred to play attributes include: (a) *nonliterality*, the meaning of the actions

being engaged in do not stand for their usual meaning (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995); (b) *intrinsic motivation*, the desire to play comes from within (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Rubin et al., 1983); (c) *process orientation*, the central concern is the activity itself and not a product or goal (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Rubin et al., 1983); (d) *free choice*, the players themselves, choose the activity (Bennett et al., 1997; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Howard, Jenvey, & Hill; 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; King, 1979; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Ranz-Smith, 2007); (e) *positive affect*, the activity is enjoyable (Bennett et al., 1997; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; King, 1979; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007); and (f) *active*, the activity is physically and/or mentally engaging (Garvey, 1990; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Rubin et al., 1983).

As these commonly cited characteristics of play demonstrate, some overlap exists among individuals' definitions of play. However, even with this overlap, variation exists among these definitions. Moreover, even when individuals use similar characteristics to define play, the terms themselves may have different meanings. For instance, Rubin et al. (1983) and Johnson et al. (2005) both characterized play as intrinsically motivated. However, Rubin et al. (1983) seems to have equated intrinsic motivation with play being pleasurable, while Johnson et al. (2005) seems to have defined intrinsic motivation as motivation that "comes from within the individual" (p. 16) and then used a separate characteristic, positive affect, to describe play as pleasurable.

With regard to defining play by observable behavior, some researchers define play by the form of the activity. Here, the focus is on what a particular play activity indicates about a child's developmental level (Fein & Stork, 1981; Rubin et al., 1983; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). For instance, Piaget (1962) created a play hierarchy that included functional play, symbolic and constructive play, and games with rules. For Piaget, from a developmental standpoint, children who are engaged in games with rules, such as tag, are further along in their development than those engaged in functional play, such as shaking a pacifier

back and forth. Thus, the particular form of play that children engage in provides information about the child's development level.

Within this definitional approach, some researchers have focused on defining subtypes of play. For instance, Smilansky (1968), an Israeli scholar whose research informed much of the work on sociodramatic play, defined it as a separate form of play, namely, "...a form of voluntary social play activity in which preschool children participate" (p. 7). Later, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) further crystallized Smilansky's original definition of sociodramatic play by distinguishing it from other forms of play. That is, they described reasons for eschewing terms sometimes associated with sociodramatic play, such as *symbolic play*, *representational play*, *make-believe play*, *pretend play*, and *role-play*. The authors acknowledged, however, that researchers may use these other terms interchangeably with sociodramatic play.

Although play is most commonly defined by its characteristics and forms, these approaches have limitations. In the next section, I offer a critique of these definitional approaches. In addition, I describe two shared understandings which seem to connect these diverse perspectives on how to define play.

### ***Critiques of Prevalent Definitions of Play***

Because of its prevalence, Ailwood (2003) raised questions about using forms and characteristics to define play. In particular, she suggested that each approach reflects dominant discourses of play, namely *romantic/nostalgic discourse* and *the characteristics discourse*. In terms of the romantic/nostalgic discourse, Ailwood suggested that the types of activities associated with play grow out of nostalgic images of childhood as "a time of innocence and purity" (p. 288). Translating these images to early childhood education leads play to be "broken down, divided up and constantly observed" (p. 289). Thus, these forms of play represent adults' visions of how they believe play should be rather than the types of play children may actually engage in.

Just as the romantic/nostalgic discourse breaks down play into specific forms, the characteristics discourse breaks down play into specific underlying characteristics (Ailwood, 2003). In addition, like the romantic/nostalgic discourse these characteristics

often grow out of people's idealized images of childhood. According to Ailwood, the characteristics used to define play are "relatively context free, and the childhood in which they exist tends to be cut off from social and contextual factors" (p. 289). Thus, by emphasizing forms and characteristics of play, play itself becomes a narrow construct created by adults for children.

In addition to Ailwood (2003), Sutton-Smith (1997) noted that traditional definitions of play cannot fully convey the variability and complexity of play itself. Thus, he advocated for a broader definition of play suggesting that "the search for a definition at this time is a search only for metaphors that can act as a rhetoric for what might ultimately become adequate scientific processual accounts" (p. 218). Specifically, he stated that a definition of play should, (a) have breadth and include passive and active forms of play, (b) include animals, humans, adults and children, (c) move beyond Western oriented terms, such as "nonproductive, rational, voluntary, and fun" (p. 218), (d) be positioned as a style or performance as well as an attitude or experience, (e) be temporal, that is, spanning a single moment to many years, and (f) be considered a form of communication. From Sutton-Smith's perspective, broadening the definition of play may expand our understanding of it.

Although multiple perspectives on defining play exist, these perspectives seem to share two understandings. First, play is a commonly used term with divergent meanings (Klugman & Fasoli, 1995). And, second, play is a complicated construct that is not easily defined (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; McLane et al., 1996).

### **Section Summary**

In this section, I examined varying perspectives on play by exploring the multiple theories and definitions of it. Although tension exists among the various perspectives on play, several common themes appear to tie these diverging viewpoints together. First, there seems to be some agreement that play has value (Bell, 1991; Bennett et al., 1997; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2002; Feldman, 1996; Fromberg, 2006; Goldstein, 2007; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Keating et al.,

2000; Kemple, 1996; Klein, 1996; Lakin, 1996; Lee, 2006; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2004; Rothlein & Brett, 1987; Sutton-Smith, 1997); Second, play is a complicated construct with no clear definition (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; McLane et al., 1996).

### **PRESERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS**

Because of the limited research on preservice teachers' beliefs about play, examining research on beliefs in general and on preservice teachers' beliefs in particular provides the means for making sense of this limited research in a broader context (Boote & Beile, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this section is to provide a foundational understanding of research on preservice teachers' beliefs and to use it to revisit the single study on preservice teachers' beliefs about play (Klugman, 1996). In addition, I explore the challenges of beliefs research, and describe the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

#### **Features of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs**

Growing out of research on teachers' cognition, a significant body of literature has examined preservice teachers' beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; File & Gullo, 2002; Genishi et al., 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Levin & He, 2008; Linek et al., 1999; Lortie, 1975; Minor et al., 2002; Nettle, 1998; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Raths, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Smith, 1997; Weinstein, 1988,1989; Wideen et al., 1998; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Although the focus of these studies varies, as a group they offer insights into preservice teachers' beliefs generally. Specifically, they illustrate the influences outside of teacher education that shape preservice teachers' beliefs, the characteristics of preservice teachers' beliefs,



and the influence of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs. In this section, each feature will be discussed in turn.

### ***Influences Outside of Teacher Education that Shape Preservice Teachers' Beliefs***

Multiple experiences outside of teacher education seem to influence preservice teachers' beliefs (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Levin & He, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). In addition, the beliefs derived from these experiences seem to act as a standard for preservice teachers' beliefs and as a lens for making sense of teacher education coursework (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Weinstein, 1988, 1989; Wideen et al., 1998). After discussing the experiences outside of teacher education that influence preservice teachers' beliefs, I describe how preservice teachers utilize beliefs evolving from these experiences.

Preservice teachers' beliefs seem to be influenced by three types of experiences that occur outside of teacher education, including their previous educational experiences (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Levin & He, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989); their experiences with family and friends (Levin & He, 2008; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001); and their informal experiences working with young children (Scott, 2005; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). With regard to their own educational experiences, most preservice teachers spend over a decade in educational settings prior to entering a teacher education program (Pajares, 1992). Unlike other professions in which individuals may begin their education and training with limited practical experience, preservice teachers have extensive experience directly related to their field of interest (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Lortie, 1975). As Feiman-Nemser & Remillard (1996) noted, "The influence of schooling is especially strong. Future teachers spend thousands

of hours in elementary and secondary school watching what teachers do and developing images about and dispositions toward teaching, learning, and subject matter” (p. 65). Thus, preservice teachers’ beliefs seem to grow out of their extensive experiences in school settings.

Beyond their educational experiences, preservice teachers’ beliefs seem to develop from their experiences with family and friends (Levin & He, 2008; Scott, 2005); and informal experiences working with young children (Scott, 2005; Weinstein, 1988). In her mixed-methods study of experiences influencing preservice teachers’ approaches to primary mathematics instruction, Scott (2005) found that in addition to their previous educational experiences the preservice teachers believed that interactions with children outside of their teacher education program and discussions with family and friends who worked in education informed their beliefs about teaching mathematics. For instance, the preservice teachers seemed to draw on their experiences tutoring young children. As a case in point, one of the preservice teachers indicated that tutoring had taught her pedagogical strategies that she could use as a teacher. With regard to conversations with family and friends, some of the preservice teachers also indicated these conversations helped inform their beliefs about mathematics instruction. For instance, one preservice teacher described discussions with her boyfriend’s mother, a practicing teacher, as helping her make sense of her teacher education coursework.

Although these experiences relate to education, preservice teachers do not engage in these experiences as teachers (Pajares, 1992; Lortie, 1975). Rather, preservice teachers understand these experiences from the perspective of a student or untrained assistant. Lortie (1975) suggested that students’ limited view of the teacher’s role coupled with their inability to analytically assess a teacher’s performance encourage students to develop idealistic notions about teaching and learning. In addition, because these experiences may be several years old, Jacobs and Eskridge (1999) suggested that they “can be blurred by time or distorted by other events and misconceptions” and can lead people to overgeneralize from their personal experiences (p. 64). Thus, not only can prior experiences become hazy over time, relying on those experiences suggest a direct correlation between a particular experience and a later outcome (Pajares, 1992). For

instance, Calderhead and Robson's (1991) year long qualitative study of 12 students enrolled in a teacher preparation program found that the preservice teachers often based their images of good teaching on "one or two particular teachers they knew, who stood out as role models" (p. 4). In this regard, their experiences seem to have acted as a standard for their beliefs.

Not only do experiences outside of teacher education provide a foundation for preservice teachers' beliefs, these beliefs seem to influence whether and how they learn during their teacher preparation program (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Weinstein, 1998, 1989; Wideen et al., 1998). For instance, in Hollingsworth's (1989) longitudinal qualitative study of 14 preservice teachers enrolled in a fifth year educational program, she suggested that the preservice teachers' beliefs acted "... as filters for processing program content and making sense of classroom contexts" (p. 168). Specifically, she found that the preservice teachers' understanding of constructivist learning, the learning approach emphasized in their teacher education program, seemed related to their prior experiences with and incoming beliefs about teaching and learning. Thus, multiple experiences outside of teacher education influence preservice teachers' beliefs, and the beliefs evolving from these experiences seem to act as a standard and as a lens through which preservice teachers make sense of their teacher preparation coursework.

### ***Characteristics of Preservice Teachers' Beliefs***

Preservice teachers' beliefs have been described as robust and diverse (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Lortie, 1975; Minor et al., 2002; Pajares, 1992; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Smith, 1997). First, because of the extensive amount of time they spend in schools prior to teacher preparation, preservice teachers enter their teacher preparation programs with well-established beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Lortie, 1975). According to Pajares (1992), "...evaluations of teaching and teachers that individuals make as children survive nearly intact into adulthood and become stable

judgments that do not change even as teacher candidates grow into competent professionals” (p. 324). Thus, the length of K-12 experiences may result in reinforcement of beliefs developed during that period (Pajares, 1992). For instance, findings from Skamp & Mueller’s (2001) study of influences that shape preservice teachers’ beliefs about primary science practice indicated that even at the end of their preparation program some of the preservice teachers continued to cite their elementary school experiences as an influence on their beliefs.

Second, preservice teachers seem to hold diverse beliefs (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Minor et al., 2002; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Smith, 1997). For instance, Schmidt and Kennedy’s (1990) study reveals significant differences among preservice teachers’ beliefs about writing and mathematics. Using questionnaire data from a larger National Center for Research on Teacher Education (NCRTE) study on preservice and inservice teachers enrolled in 10 different teacher preparation programs, Schmidt and Kennedy analyzed and categorized participants’ survey responses into 108 belief patterns for writing and 54 belief patterns for mathematics. Although there were fewer mathematics belief patterns than writing belief patterns, the researchers highlighted the range of beliefs across both content areas. Because of these differences in beliefs, Schmidt and Kennedy cautioned against assuming that all preservice teachers bring the same beliefs to their teacher preparation programs.

Similar to Schmidt and Kennedy (1990), Minor et al.’s (2002) study of 132 elementary, middle school, and secondary preservice teachers enrolled in an introductory education course further illustrates the diversity among preservice teachers’ beliefs. Using the Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Characteristics of Effective Teachers Survey (PTPCETS) the participants in their study ranked and defined the most important characteristics of quality teaching. Student centeredness and effective classroom management received the highest rankings while knowledge of subject matter and professionalism received the lowest rankings. In addition to the PTPCETS, researchers administered the Witcher-Travers Survey of Educational Beliefs (WTSEB) which examined educational beliefs by labeling them as transmissive (e.g. teacher as teller) or progressive (e.g. teacher as educator of the whole child). Although nearly half of the

participants fell between the transmissive and the progressive views of education, over twice as many participants took a transmissive position (28.4%) than a progressive one (12.7%). Thus, although some overlap may exist among preservice teachers' beliefs, they do not share a universal understanding of teaching and learning.

### ***Influence of Teacher Education on Preservice Teachers' Beliefs***

Because preservice teachers' beliefs seem to influence whether and how they learn (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Weinstein, 1998, 1989; Wideen et al., 1998), researchers have analyzed the influence of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Early research on teacher education indicates that it was largely ineffective in changing preservice teachers' incoming beliefs about teaching and learning. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) hypothesized three reasons for such failure. First, preservice teachers may become more progressive in their thinking during teacher preparation; however, those changes in thinking may be "washed out" once they become socialized into the profession. Second, preservice teachers do not change their thinking during teacher preparation; rather, their incoming beliefs about teaching and learning lie dormant during teacher preparation and resurface when they begin to teach in their own classrooms. Third, although teacher education programs may claim to be "progressive," they often present material in traditional manners that perpetuate conservative notions of teaching and learning.

More recent findings have suggested that teacher education may influence beliefs; however, the extent of its influence seems to vary (Anderson, 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001). For instance, Linek et al.'s (1999) study of the effects of three different

instructional formats on preservice teachers' beliefs about literacy—(a) a university class on literacy (n=7), (b) a university class on literacy coupled with an unsupervised field experience (n=25), and (c) a field-based literacy course (n=40)—indicated that the preservice teachers in all three interventions “described similar shifts in their beliefs about literacy learning and teaching. They generally moved from a simplistic teacher-centered, skills-based view...to a complex, student-centered, meaning-based philosophy” (p. 6). However, according to Linek et al., members of the two groups that participated in a field-placement demonstrated more significant changes in their beliefs than the group without one. This led Linek et al. to conclude that “a connection to the field appears to provide concrete experience preservice teachers need to test their new knowledge and anchor their developing beliefs about literacy teaching and learning” (p. 8). One limitation of Linek et al.'s findings, however, is that the number of preservice teachers in each intervention varied. Specifically, 65 of the 72 preservice teachers participated in a field placement while only 7 preservice teachers participated in the classroom only intervention. Thus, the researchers had significantly more data to support their findings for the field placement groups than for the group without one.

In a second instance, Anderson (2001), analyzing three studies which examined whether and how preservice teachers learned to teach, found that how a course addressed incoming beliefs influenced the extent to which those beliefs changed. In the first case study, the professor challenged preservice teachers' traditional notions of teachers and teaching and found that preservice teachers' entering beliefs shaped their perceptions of what they learned. Instead of developing new conceptions of teaching, the students used the course material to further explain their incoming beliefs. In the second case study, a teacher educator, using her knowledge about preservice teachers' beliefs, made predictions about the entering beliefs of her students (e.g. they would believe that learning is a function of students' motivation and interest, effective teaching is defined by a teacher's enthusiasm, and listening to teachers and reading textbooks are the most effective ways for students to learn) and designed a course to specifically address those beliefs. This case study found that changes in preservice teachers' entering beliefs occurred when those beliefs were aligned with the predicted beliefs hypothesized by the

teacher educator. When a student entered with a different set of beliefs, however, the coursework seemed to have less of an effect on changing the student's beliefs. In the third case study, teacher educators collaborated on designing a core set of courses that incorporated similar themes, such as actively constructing knowledge through situated activities, incorporating preservice teachers' prior knowledge, and presenting a flexible curriculum model. Similar to the second case study, the extent to which preservice teachers' beliefs changed was based on how closely aligned their entering beliefs were with the course content.

Against the backdrop of studies examining the influence of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs, researchers have begun to raise questions about the appropriateness of this line of research. Raths (2001) problematized the notion of belief change by pointing to periods in history (e.g. the Korean War) when people in power used belief change for the purpose of "brainwashing" their subordinates. Instead of changing beliefs, he suggested teacher preparation programs should focus on strengthening teacher candidates' skills and dispositions. The concerns raised by the participants in Linek et al.'s (1999) study echoes Raths' (2001) concerns; they felt that "belief change" implied their beliefs were incorrect thus minimizing their current levels of knowledge and experience and marginalizing their role in the learning process. They preferred the term "growth" over the term "change." Finally, Holt-Reynolds (1992) cautioned teacher educators by stating they should be sensitive towards preservice teachers' incoming beliefs. She suggested that preservice teachers' beliefs often motivate them to enter the teaching profession. Additionally, she noted that their beliefs are valuable to teacher educators themselves because "drawing on their recent and still accessible histories as students, preservice teachers know something about the relationship of student engagement with material and student interest that our own research has overlooked" (p. 346). Thus, instead of perceiving preservice teachers' beliefs negatively, teacher educators should view them as potential sources of information.

Although the focus of research on preservice teachers' beliefs varies, as a group they offer insights into preservice teachers' beliefs generally. Specifically, they illustrate

the influences outside of teacher education that shape preservice teachers' beliefs, the characteristics of preservice teachers' beliefs, and the influence of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs. In the next section, I revisit the one study on preservice teachers' beliefs about play and describe how it intersects with current research on play and preservice teachers' beliefs.

### **Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play**

Even though researchers have individually examined play and preservice teachers' beliefs, research on preservice teachers' beliefs about play remains largely unaddressed. To date, only one study has examined preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Specifically, Klugman (1996) surveyed an incoming class of college freshmen (n=169), who described themselves as "interested in work with children" (p. 15), to determine their understanding of play and to examine how their childhood play experiences influenced their current thinking about play. He suggested these findings could be used "to identify gaps" in the program and to "design or redesign...early childhood and life preparation programs that can more effectively prepare students entering the field to support the play of young children" (p. 15).

Results from Klugman's (1996) study indicated that the college freshmen entered their preparation program with memories of their own childhood play experiences at home and at school. For instance, the majority of participants remembered playing outside when they were at home. To a lesser extent they remembered playing inside their homes with toys, families, and friends. In terms of play at school, participants recalled play episodes during recess and pretend and constructive play in the classroom. For most participants (n=59), outdoor play included "large-muscle activities involving playground equipment (jungle gym, basketball hoop, slide, and swings)" (p. 19). A small number of participants could not remember playing at school.

Klugman suggested that these childhood experiences shaped the students' current perspectives on play. In particular, the students seem to have been influenced by issues of gender, generation and social development. For instance, a large number of participants (n=118) associated play with social development. According to Klugman, the theme of



social development appeared throughout respondents' survey answers. Specifically, they made connections between play and learning social skills and they emphasized playing in groups over playing alone.

In addition to connecting play and social development, the participants in Klugman's (1996) study connected play with learning in general. He suggested, however, that their understanding of this connection was weak. While a few participants (n=8) provided specific instances of children's learning during play, for instance, "*learn[ing] colors, shapes, numbers and letters*" (p. 24), the majority of participants provided vague responses, such as "*I think children learn more by playing*" or "*When you are playing with children, they don't always realize that they are being taught something*" (p. 24). Furthermore, a third group of students indicated that play encouraged learning about oneself and his/her environment.

Klugman's (1996) findings seem to align with components of research on play and on preservice teachers' beliefs. In terms of play, the students' childhood play experiences seem to reflect multiple approaches to incorporating play in the early childhood classroom. First, the large number of students who equated play with recess and the small number of students who could not recall playing in school suggests that their teachers may have employed a nonplay approach that dichotomized work and play (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Second, some students' recollections of dramatic play in the classroom may suggest their teachers utilized a narrowly focused intervention approach in which a particular form of play was emphasized over others (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Third, some students' recollections of engaging in multiple forms of play at school may reflect childhood experiences with the broad-based development approach, which incorporates a range of play activities into the classroom. In addition to the types of play they discussed, the students' perspectives that play is connected to social development and learning seem to reflect social (Parten, 1932) and cognitive (Piaget, 1962, Vygotsky, 1978) theories of play. These theories can be found within the narrowly focused intervention and broad based developmental approaches and reflect dominant discourses on the connection between play and development (Ailwood, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Although Klugman (1996) did not ask the preservice teachers to define play, they seem to have described play by its form, recalling particular play activities. This is a common approach to defining play used by some teachers and researchers (Fein, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Rubin et al., 1983; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). In addition, even though their descriptions of play overlapped, broad variation existed among their responses. This reflects a similar quality of the definitions of play offered by researchers, teachers, and children generally (Bennett et al., 1997; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Howard et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; King, 1979; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

In addition to its alignment with particular aspects of play research, Klugman's (1996) findings also align with several elements of research on preservice teachers' beliefs, including that they are robust, diverse, and influenced by experiences outside of teacher preparation programs. First, in terms of their beliefs being robust, Klugman (1996) found that the preservice teachers not only recalled childhood play experiences, but that these experiences also influenced their beliefs. Second, with regard to their beliefs being diverse, although some overlap existed among the preservice teachers' responses, they did not seem to have a universal understanding of play. Finally, supporting the notion that preservice teachers' beliefs are based on their personal experiences, Klugman (1996) found that preservice teachers' childhood play experiences led them to make connections between play and learning social skills and to emphasize playing in groups over playing alone.

Klugman's (1996) findings provide initial insights into college freshmen's ideas about play; however, the results from his study have several limitations. First, the study itself is 12 years old. Students entering teacher preparation programs today were early childhood and elementary students themselves when the movement towards "earlier is better" (Elkind, 1990, p. 4) began. Thus, they represent a different generation than the one represented in Klugman's study. Second, although the participants in the study were pursuing education in the "human services" (p. 15), they were not exclusively preservice teachers; rather, they were interested in working with children in a variety of capacities,

such as social work. Third, because of Klugman's research design, that is (a) his use of a survey as the single assessment tool and (b) his limited attention to strategies that increase a study's credibility—such as triangulating multiple data sources (Glesne, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998); participating in prolonged engagement in the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); engaging in persistent observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); member checking interpretations for accuracy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998); and engaging in peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998; Moss, 1994)—the study has limited internal validity.

In this section, I explored the single study exploring preservice teachers' beliefs about play (Klugman, 1996) and how it intersects with research on play and preservice teachers' beliefs. In addition, I described several limitations of Klugman's study. In the next section, I discuss two challenges of conducting research on beliefs.

### **Challenges of Researching Beliefs**

Studies of preservice teachers' beliefs have expanded educational research by highlighting the complex intellectual work involved in learning to teach (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, & Remillard, 1996). Although this research has important implications for teacher preparation (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Wideen et al., 1998), it has unique challenges, including how to effectively define and document beliefs (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998). In this section, I discuss each challenge in turn.

### ***Defining Beliefs***

The multiple terms used for beliefs coupled with competing views on the nature of knowledge and beliefs make defining beliefs difficult (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Munby et al., 2001; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996, 2003). As Pajares (1992)

suggested, beliefs “...travel in disguise often under alias—attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few” (p. 309).

Further confounding the definition of beliefs are the multiple conceptions of them, such as belief as its own form of cognition and belief as a form of cognition connected to or within other thought processes such as knowledge and attitudes (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 2003). For instance, Murrell and Foster (2003) aligned beliefs with attitudes and juxtaposed them against a separate cognition, dispositions, while Smith (1997) considered beliefs part of an individual’s attitude. Bennett et al. (1997), in contrast, included beliefs along with memories, skills, information and experience under the umbrella term, knowledge.

Green (1971), on the other hand, described beliefs as separate from knowledge and suggested they are part of a system consisting of two components—what a person believes (i.e., content) and how a person believes (i.e. style). Content beliefs are comprised of *primary beliefs* and *derivative beliefs* which have a symbiotic relationship—each influencing the other. Style, or how a person believes, reflects the strength of a person’s beliefs, which Green divided into two categories: (a) beliefs that are held evidentially and (b) beliefs that are held non-evidentially. The former, *evidential beliefs*, “...are held on the basis of evidence or reasons, they can be rationally criticized and therefore can be modified in the light of further evidence or better reason” (p. 48). On the other hand, *nonevidential beliefs*, “...are held without regard to evidence, or contrary to evidence, or apart from good reasons...beliefs held nonevidentially cannot be modified by introducing evidence or reasons” (p. 48). Thus, beliefs held nonevidentially are more robust and difficult to change than beliefs held evidentially. The multiple terms and perspectives used to describe beliefs suggest that not only are beliefs called by many names, the terms themselves have nuanced distinctions.

### ***Documenting Beliefs***

The amorphous nature of beliefs makes them difficult to document (Calderhead, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998). Unlike research on teacher behavior (Brophy & Good, 1986), beliefs are difficult to document through observation alone (Calderhead, 1996; Kagan, 1990). Rather, throughout data collection and analysis, researchers must infer participants' beliefs (Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992). To account for these challenges, researchers have approached belief research from different paradigmatic perspectives—such as positivist, interpretivist, and critical—using a variety of data collection techniques and analyses (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996). Given the diverse methodologies across studies of beliefs, it is not “possible to identify a set of commonly used and accepted research techniques” (Borko & Putnam, 1996, p. 678). While there is not one “best” approach to studying beliefs, literature on beliefs suggests that researchers should consider employing multiple methods for data collection, such as interviews, observations, simulations, and think-alouds (Calderhead, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998).

Taken together, the challenges of defining and documenting beliefs complicate research on them. In order to manage these challenges, Pajares (1992) noted that:

When beliefs are carefully operationalized, appropriate methodology chosen, and design thoughtfully constructed, their study becomes viable and rewarding. It will not be possible for researchers to come to grips with teachers' beliefs, however, without first deciding what they wish *belief* to mean and how this meaning will differ from similar constructs (p. 308).

In this vein, in the next section, I describe the frameworks that I used to study the preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Beliefs**

Based on Pajares (1992) suggestion that an “articulate conversation [about beliefs] must demand not only clarity of thought and expression, but also preciseness of word choice and meaning” (Pajares, 1992, p. 309), I initially structured this study around one framework, Nespors (1987). My decision to use Nespors was two-fold. First, the

purpose of Nespor's framework—to provide “a theoretically-grounded model of ‘belief systems’ that can serve as a framework for systematic and comparative investigations” of beliefs (p. 317)—aligned with the purpose of my study to explore preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Second, Nespor's work is commonly used in beliefs research.

According to the *Web of Science* cited reference search, Nespor's (1987) work has been cited over 112 times. Specifically, his framework has been used to structure studies and reviews of literature on teachers' and preservice teachers' beliefs (Calderhead, 1996; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Pajares, 1992; Scott, 2005).

In terms of literature reviews, Feiman-Nemser and Remillard (1992) suggested that Nespor's (1987) work alerted teacher educators “to images and ideas their students may hold while providing a map of relevant categories of beliefs to explore” (p. 70). And, Pajares (1992) used Nespor's (1987) work to (a) delineate between knowledge and beliefs, (b) describe the effect of beliefs on teachers' practice, and (c) define belief systems. Similarly, Calderhead (1996) used Nespor to define and frame the term belief in his review of research on teachers' beliefs. Finally, with regard to research, Joram & Gabriele (1998), who examined how preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning changed during their semester long educational psychology course, used Nespor to illustrate the “nature of preservice teachers' beliefs” (p. 176). Moreover, in studying the influence of preservice teachers' experiences on their beliefs about mathematics, Scott (2005) utilized Nespor (1987) to distinguish between beliefs and knowledge. Thus, the use of Nespor's beliefs framework seems well-established.

Although I framed this study around Nespor (1987), as I engaged in data analysis, I found that Nespor's framework alone did not fully capture the complexity of the data. Following Wolcott's (1994) advice, in which he encouraged researchers to listen to gatekeepers guiding their work, I addressed this issue with my dissertation chair, and he suggested that I turn to Vygotsky (1986) for some possible insights. Although Vygotsky (1986) did not explicitly address beliefs, his notion of conceptual development and Nespor's (1987) beliefs framework seem to complement one another. Thus, I used both frameworks to analyze my data. In this section, I (a) describe Nespor's (1987) beliefs framework, (b) describe Vygotsky's (1986) continuum for conceptual development, (c)

discuss the complementary aspects of these frameworks, and (d) make an argument for using Nespor (1987) and Vygotsky (1986) in this study.

### ***Nespor's Framework for Beliefs***

Using relevant theory coupled with field-based research, Nespor identified (a) four influences that shape beliefs, (b) two qualities of belief systems, and (c) two functions of beliefs. In terms of influences that shape beliefs, Nespor (1987) suggested four such influences, namely, *existential presumption*, *alternativity*, *affective and evaluative loading*, and *episodic structure*. First, according to Nespor, universal assumptions, which he referred to as *existential presumption*, represent a situation or an idea that appears real or true regardless of whether or not it is. Nespor suggested that existential presumption occurs through “the reification of transitory, ambiguous, conditional or abstract characteristics into stable, well-defined, absolute and concrete entities” (p. 318). An example of existential presumption suggested by Nespor was that of a teacher who believed students who failed his mathematics course were “lazy” (p. 318). No empirical evidence existed that the child failed because he was lazy; however, this teacher believed that lazy students fail.

Second, Nespor (1987) suggested that ideals, which he referred to as *alternativity*, reflect a person's conception of an optimum situation (e.g. how a person would like a situation to be), versus the present reality of that situation. And, he suggested that conceptions of ideal situations are not necessarily based on a person's direct experience. For instance, Nespor described a teacher who desired a fun and friendly classroom similar to the one she had attended. Nespor found, however, that neither the teacher's own classroom nor her childhood experiences reflected that ideal. Nespor stated, “This was a sort of Utopian alternative to the sorts of classrooms she was familiar with” (p. 319).

Third, Nespor (1987) suggested that feelings, which he referred to as *affective and evaluative loading*, represent the emotive component of teacher's beliefs and their inclination towards a particular domain. According to Nespor (1987) “knowledge of a domain can be conceptually distinguished from feelings about that domain” (p. 319). For

instance, he described a chess player who knows the rules of the game (i.e. knowledge), but may not like or enjoy the game itself (i.e. preference). In addition, he discussed several teachers' preferences for teaching content that "in their view, might have some lasting impact on students" (e.g. manners) (p. 319), over teaching discrete history facts that they assumed the students would forget.

Finally, Nespor described experience, which he referred to as *episodic storage*, as a final influence that shapes beliefs. Nespor (1987) stated, "Beliefs often derive their subjective power, authority, and legitimacy from particular episodes or events. These critical episodes then continue to colour or frame the comprehension of events later in time" (p. 320). For instance, a teacher who as a child enjoyed her third grade teacher's art activities over the didactic activities of her other elementary school teachers may include art activities in her own classroom. Nespor tells us "such critical episodes are probably at the root of the fact that teachers learn a lot about teaching through their experience as students" (p. 320).

Nespor (1987) posited that the four influences shaping beliefs lead belief systems, or clusters of beliefs (Green, 1971), to be *non-consensual* and *unbounded*. In terms of non-consensuality, he suggested that belief systems are "simply not open to outside evaluation or critical examination in the same sense that the components of knowledge systems are" (Nespor, 1987, p. 321). Thus, unlike knowledge systems, which are based on "...well-established canons of argument" (p. 321), belief systems are personal. In addition to non-consensuality, the influences on beliefs lead them to be unbounded, which Nespor defined as "...loosely-bounded systems with highly variable and uncertain linkages to events, situations, and knowledge systems..." (p. 321). And, because belief systems are loosely-structured and not well-defined, "...they can be extended in radical and unpredictable ways" (p. 321).

In addition to affecting the structure of belief systems, Nespor (1987) suggested that the four influences that shape beliefs have a symbiotic relationship and are utilized by teachers in two manners, namely, memory facilitation and task definition. First, Nespor suggested that the affective and evaluative component of beliefs impact which experiences have the greatest influence on teachers' beliefs. He stated:



The affective and emotional components of beliefs can influence the ways events and elements in memory are indexed and retrieved and how they are reconstructed during recall (p. 324).

Thus, a person's affective response to an event in his or her life shapes the extent to which that experience informs her beliefs. Second, he suggested that teachers draw upon all four influences—their universal assumptions, ideals, feelings, and experiences—when defining and framing tasks. Specifically, he stated that “beliefs perform the function of ‘framing’ or defining the task at hand” (p. 322). Thus, working together these influences shape how teachers approach their work.

Nespor's framework highlights what influences shape beliefs, how belief systems are structured, and how teachers' utilize different influences to approach their work. Although comprehensive, his work alone could not fully explain the beliefs about play expressed by the preservice teachers in this study. In the next section, I describe a second framework that I use to provide further insight into the preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

### ***Vygotsky's Framework for Conceptual Development***

Like Nespor (1987), Vygotsky (1986) also suggested that experiences influence thinking, however, he extended Nespor's (1987) work by describing two distinct types of experiences, *everyday* and *classroom* experiences, which he believed lead to two types of conceptual development, *spontaneous* and *scientific*. According to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991):

By spontaneous concepts he [Vygotsky] meant concepts that are acquired by the child outside of the context of explicit instruction. In themselves these concepts are mostly taken from adults, but they never have been introduced to the child in a systematic fashion and no attempts have been made to connect them with other related concepts...By 'scientific' concepts Vygotsky meant concepts that had been explicitly introduced by the teacher at school. Ideally such concepts would cover the essential aspects of an area of knowledge and would be presented as a system of interrelated ideas (p. 270).

Thus, spontaneous concepts, which Vygotsky (1986) described as “situational, empirical, and practical” (p. 194), develop informally through everyday experiences, and scientific concepts, which he described as “conscious and deliberate” (p. 194), develop formally through systematic instruction.

For Vygotsky (1986), the structural differences between spontaneous and scientific concepts allow them to have a symbiotic relationship. Describing this relationship he stated:

In working its slow way upward, an everyday concept clears a path for the scientific concept and its downward development. It creates a series of structures necessary for the evolution of a concept’s more primitive, elementary aspects, which give it body and vitality. Scientific concepts, in turn, supply structures for the upward development of the child’s spontaneous concepts toward consciousness and deliberate use (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 194).

Thus, according to Vygotsky spontaneous concepts work their way up through scientific concepts, and scientific concepts work their way down through spontaneous concepts.

In addition to distinguishing between types of concepts, Vygotsky (1986) also suggested that concepts develop through a three phased continuum that consists of (a) *heaps*, (b) *complexes*, and (c) *concepts*. These phases grew out of an experiment conducted with over 300 participants including children, adolescents and adults. During the experiment, the researcher presented the participant with 22 wooden blocks of various shapes, colors, heights, and sizes. Based on its size and height, the back of each block was labeled with a nonsense word. For instance, the tall/large blocks were labeled *lag*, the flat/large blocks were labeled *bic*, the tall/small blocks were labeled *mur*, and the flat/small blocks were labeled *cev* (see pp. 103-104).

The researcher began the experiment by giving a participant all but one of the blocks. Using the latter block as a sample, he would show the participant the word on the back of the block and ask him/her to identify blocks similar to it. Once the participant grouped the items, the researcher would point out an incorrect selection. Then, using the original sample and the newly uncovered block the participant would continue attempting to group the blocks.

Based on the participants' responses, Vygotsky (1986) identified three phases of conceptual development. In the first phase, *heaps*, an individual's understanding is based on her subjective impressions alone (Blunden, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986) and ideas are "linked by chance" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 110). In the second phase, *complexes*, individuals base their understanding on "*bonds actually existing between objects*" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 112) which develop from their direct experiences. For a person thinking in complexes a word may have multiple meanings and these meanings may fluctuate, that is, they may "...be changed one or more times" (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 264). Furthermore, unlike the unifying logic of concepts, complexes may contain internal inconsistencies and be contradictory (Vygotsky, 1986). In the third phase, *concepts*, "abstracted traits are synthesized anew and the resulting abstracted traits become the main instrument of thought" (Blunden, 1997, p. 8).

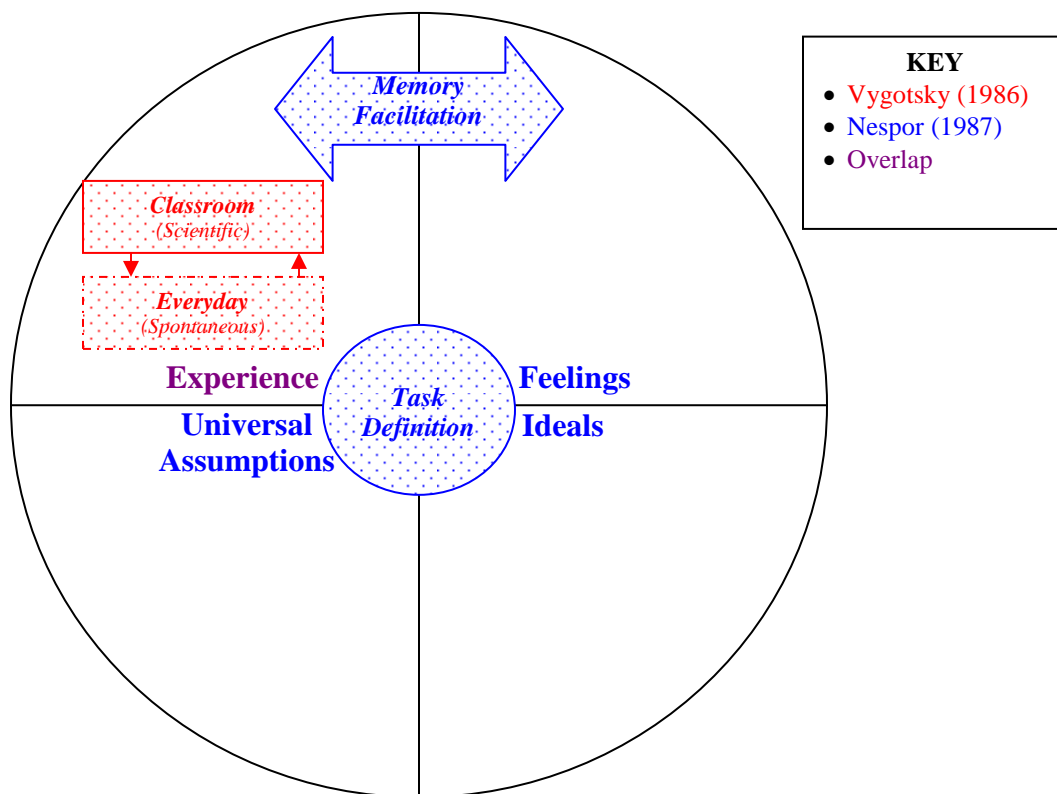
Although Vygotsky's (1986) work did not explicitly address beliefs, my analysis of his work and Nespor's (1987) leads me to conclude that they are complementary. Specifically, each framework seems to refine and extend the other. In the next section, I discuss the complementary features of these two frameworks.

### ***Complementary Dimensions of Nespor's and Vygotsky's Frameworks***

A central overlapping feature between Vygotsky's (1986) work and Nespor's (1987) is that experience plays a central role in the development of thinking (see Figure 1). Vygotsky (1986), however, refined the notion of experience by distinguishing between two distinct types of experiences, *everyday* and *classroom*. And, Nespor's (1987) work seems to extend Vygotsky's (1986) by looking beyond experience to incorporate three other features that influence beliefs, including affective and evaluative loading (i.e. feelings), alternativity (i.e. ideals), and existential presumption (i.e. universal assumptions). For both Vygotsky (1986) and Nespor (1987), these influences work in concert to shape thinking. Specifically, Vygotsky (1986) suggested that the structural differences between spontaneous concepts, which develop through everyday experiences, and scientific concepts, which develop through classroom experiences, allow them to have a symbiotic relationship. Specifically, spontaneous concepts work their way up

through scientific concepts and scientific concepts work their way down through spontaneous concepts. Like Vygotsky, who suggested a symbiotic relationship between the two types of experiences that influence thinking, Nesper (1987) suggested a similar relationship among the four influences that he described as shaping beliefs. First, he suggested that the affective and evaluative components of beliefs (i.e. feelings) affect which experiences have the greatest influence on a person's beliefs (i.e. memory facilitation). Second, he suggested that people draw upon all four influences when defining and framing tasks (i.e. task definition).

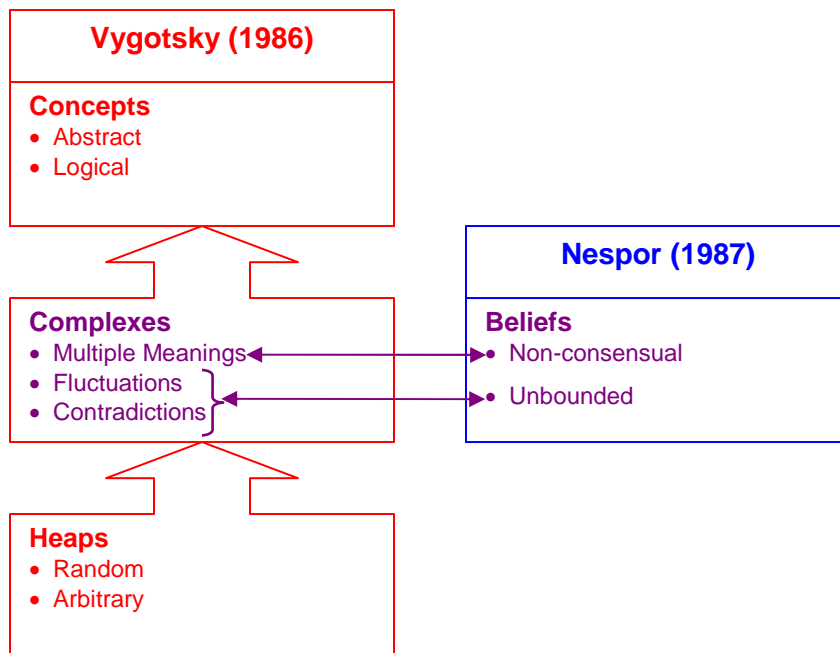
Figure 1: Foundation of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs



In addition to refining and extending each other's perspective on the influences shaping beliefs, Nesper (1987) and Vygotsky (1986) both suggested that these influences

laid the foundation for the structure of an individual’s thinking. Moreover, the structural elements suggested by Nespor (1987) and Vygotsky (1986) seem complementary (see Figure 2). Specifically, the second phase of Vygotsky’s three phase continuum of conceptual development, *complexes*, provides an analogous lens for examining the non-consensual and unbounded qualities of belief systems. First, Nespor’s (1987) notion of non-consensuality seems to align with a central feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely, that they have multiple meanings. Second, Nespor’s (1987) notion of unboundedness seems to align with two other features of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely, that they fluctuate and are contradictory.

Figure 2: Structure of the Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs



Although using Nespor’s (1986) and Vygotsky’s (1987) frameworks together led to new insights into my data, some may find my decision to combine them problematic (File, 1995; Gredler & Shields, 2004). In the next section, I discuss these alternative perspectives. And, I make a case for my decision to use both frameworks in this study.

### *A Case for Complementary Frameworks*

Some may question the appropriateness of using Vygotsky's (1986) work to discuss beliefs, a construct he himself did not specifically address, and to applying his ideas, which grew out of empirical findings related to physical items, to an amorphous construct like play. Those who maintain a strict reading of Vygotsky's writings have problematized using his work in this fashion (File, 1995; Gredler & Shields, 2004). For instance, File (1995) questioned the trend in early childhood education to couple Vygotsky's theories with Piaget's. For File, these two theorists had incompatible paradigmatic stances on teaching, learning and development and by adding one to the other, she suggested, "there is a risk of misrepresentation. Concepts come into vogue and risk becoming 'buzzwords' that are applied with less and less fidelity to the original construct" (File, 1995, p. 299). More recently, Gredler and Shields (2004), in their commentary on Glassman's (2001) article equating Dewey's and Vygotsky's ideas "concerning the relationship of activity and learning/development" (Glassman, 2001, p. 3), suggested that using Vygotsky in this fashion "...misconstrues major concepts addressed by Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development" (Gredler & Shields, 2004, p. 21).

In contrast to those who have proposed a strict reading of Vygotsky's work, Glassman and Wang (2004), in their response to Gredler and Shields (2004), suggested that:

...meanings (of theories) are dynamic and dependent on use. The way in which members of a community understand, conceptualize or operationalize a theoretical construct is very much dependent on its use as a tool (to meet the needs of that community) (p. 19).

Further explaining their position, they stated:

...as a theory become more popular, more and more individuals (and the intellectual communities to which they belong) begin to recognize it as a possible tool in their own ongoing activities. These individuals and communities develop interpretations of theoretical constructs that will meet their own motives and goals (p. 20).

Given the purpose of the basic qualitative methodology used to frame this study—namely, to “discover and understand a phenomenon, process, or the perspective and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11)—and the support Vygotsky’s (1986) work offers in this endeavor coupled with the implications using his work has for beliefs research generally, I find myself aligned with Glassman and Wang (2004). Thus, for the purposes of this study, using Vygotsky’s (1986) notion of conceptual development as a complementary framework for analyzing and discussing the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play seems appropriate.

### **Section Summary**

In this section, I discussed the features of preservice teachers’ beliefs, revisited the single study on preservice teachers’ beliefs about play (Klugman, 1996), explored the challenges of defining and conceptualizing beliefs, and described the theoretical frameworks used to investigate beliefs in this study (Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986). This diverse body of literature demonstrates the complex intellectual work involved in learning to teach (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, & Remillard, 1996); the implications preservice teachers’ beliefs have for teacher education (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Wideen et al., 1998), and the difficulty of conducting studies on beliefs (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Munby et al., 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998).

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the intricate role of play in early childhood education, preservice teachers’ beliefs about play remain largely unexplored. Given that preservice teachers’ beliefs may ultimately influence their teaching (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Einarsdottir, 2001; Genishi et al., 2001; Kemple, 1996; Nespor, 1987; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000; Pajares, 1992; Stipek & Byler, 1997), uncovering preservice teachers’ beliefs about play has been described as an important step towards

effectively addressing play in teacher preparation (Klugman, 1996). Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences that shape those beliefs, with the expectation that such understanding might assist early childhood teacher educators in addressing this complex area of early childhood education in their preparation programs. In the next chapter, I describe the research design used to explore this issue.



## Chapter 3: Research Design

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the research design used to explore the following research questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in early childhood education?
  - a. What do preservice teachers believe constitutes play?
  - b. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in learning and development?
  - c. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the teacher's role in play?
2. What do the preservice teachers believe influenced their beliefs about play?  
And, how do these influences appear to have shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play?

Given the nature of the stated research questions and the complexity of studying beliefs about play, the interpretivist research paradigm framed this study. According to Erickson (1986), "Interpretivist research is concerned with the specifics of meaning and action in social life that takes place in concrete scenes of face-to-face interaction, and that takes place in the wider society surrounding the scene of action" (p. 156).

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, a *basic or generic qualitative methodology* acted as the underlying research design (Merriam, 1998),<sup>2</sup> and data collection and data analysis grew out of this methodology. In the following pages, I explain this study's research design by describing its: (a) research paradigm; (b) research methodology; (c) sampling, context and participants; (d) data collection; (e) data analysis; (f) quality and rigor; and (g) ethical considerations.

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<sup>2</sup> For readability, the *basic or generic qualitative methodology* will be referred to as *basic qualitative methodology* in the proceeding pages.

## **RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Research—its purpose, questions, data analysis, findings, conclusions and implications—is not only a reflection of a study’s results, but (also) a reflection of the researcher herself. The overarching research paradigm guiding a researcher’s work influences every aspect of it. According to Crotty (1998), “...at every point in our research...we inject a host of assumptions...Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying” (p. 17). The centrality of research paradigms in shaping research necessitates a statement about my own paradigmatic stance. Specifically, the interpretivist paradigm, founded on the ontological notion of realism and the epistemological notion of constructionism (Crotty, 1998), framed this study. Researchers holding this perspective believe that humans live in a “real” world, but how they understand that world varies (Crotty, 1998). Thus, research guided by this paradigm does not focus on finding the one “correct” answer; but rather, on developing a deeper understanding of the topic under study.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In line with this study’s overarching interpretivist paradigm, a basic qualitative methodology guided data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). This commonly used form of research, which is often used in educational studies, seeks “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Merriam characterized basic qualitative research as: (a) “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (p. 6), (b) having the researcher act as “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 7), (c) containing fieldwork, (d) employing “an inductive research strategy” (p. 7), and (d) resulting in a product which is “richly descriptive” (p. 8).

With regard to data collection and analysis, basic qualitative studies often use direct observations, interviews, and artifact or document analysis (Merriam, 1998). The collected data is then analyzed for patterns that occur across data and in turn those patterns are used to make inferences about the study’s results (Merriam, 1998). Basic

qualitative studies differ from other qualitative methodologies—such as ethnography, grounded theory and case studies—in that “they do not focus on culture or build a grounded theory; nor are they intensive case studies of a single unit or bounded system” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11).

### **SAMPLING, CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS**

Reflective of the interpretivist paradigm and the basic qualitative methodology that framed this study, *intensity* sampling—a type of purposeful sampling—was used for the selection of the research site and participants. With intensity sampling, “the researcher wants to identify sites or individuals in which the phenomenon of interest is strongly represented” (Mertens, 1998, p. 262). Using pilot study data, a researcher determines the extent to which the site and participants will provide quality data to fulfill the study’s purpose and to answer its research questions (Mertens, 1998).

Based on findings from my pilot study, I chose to conduct this current study in an early childhood practicum at Hawkins University, a small private university in south central Texas with an enrollment of 2,300 students. This practicum was purposefully selected because of its focus on play in early childhood education and the course’s structure, which created space for students to talk and write about their beliefs about play. In addition, pilot study data indicated that students in the course were thoughtful, reflective, and willing to engage in discussions about their beliefs during interviews, classroom discussions, and in formal and informal writing assignments. Thus, in line with intensity sampling, this research location offered a context in which “the phenomenon of interest” (Mertens, 1998, p. 262), namely preservice teachers’ beliefs about play, was clearly represented. In the remainder of this section, I describe (a) Hawkins University and its education program; (b) the early childhood practicum course; and (c) the study’s participants.

#### **Hawkins University**

Hawkins University serves a predominately White (66%) student body whose median SAT score nears 1300. According to the course catalogue, Hawkins University’s

Education Department offers a five-year Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program leading to certification in one of three levels: (a) early childhood through grade 4, (b) grades 4 through 8, and (c) grades 8 through 12. During their undergraduate experience, students major in a content area and take thirteen hours of education coursework including two practicum courses, one field seminar, one human growth and development course, one senior seminar, and one computer science course. Students pursuing the early childhood through grade 4 certificate major in Humanities, a 36 hour interdisciplinary degree, and in addition to the regular education sequence complete 12 hours of Special Education coursework. After receiving their bachelor's degree, students enroll in the Department's one year MAT program where they complete coursework and a one-year, unpaid, mentored internship at one of the Department's six professional development schools. Historically, the program has had a 100% pass rate on its state certification exams and 100% placement of its students after graduation.

### **Early Childhood Practicum Course**

Research for this study was conducted in an early childhood through grade four practicum course taught by Dr. Joyce Ryan, an associate professor in her seventh year of practice. This practicum, offered during the spring semester of each year, focused on learning communities, child study, and play. During the spring of 2007, 13 students were enrolled in the course including 3 first year students, 7 sophomores, and 3 seniors. On the first day of class, 12 of the students described themselves as interested in pursuing education, and 1 student described herself as interested in pursuing school psychology (Narrative 1/11/2007). During the first three weeks of the course, students met on campus for three hours a week. Over the remaining 11 weeks of the semester, students spent 1.5 hours per week in the university-based portion of the course and 1.5 hours per week in a prekindergarten or a kindergarten class at Stowe Academy, a public inner city charter school serving students from pre-kindergarten through grade 8. In this section, I describe, in turn, the university-based portion of the course and the field-based portion of the course.

### ***University-Based Component of Course***

Although not the sole focus of the course, Dr. Ryan provided several opportunities for students to write about, to read, and to discuss play in early childhood education. In this section, I describe (a) course writing assignments connected to play, (b) course reading assignments connected to play, and (c) course discussions about play in their field placements. First, two course writing assignments addressed play, namely an informal writing assignment entitled Initial Ideas about Early Childhood Education (IIECE) and a formal child study assignment. With respect to the informal IIECE, on the first day of the class, Dr. Ryan asked the students to clarify their beliefs about early childhood education by imagining and describing their future prekindergarten or kindergarten classrooms. Three of the questions in the assignment explicitly addressed play: (a) Will your students be encouraged/allowed to play in your classroom? If so, what types of play will they engage in? (b) What purposes will play serve in your classroom? (c) And, as the teacher, what role, if any will you have in students' play? The students completed the assignment at home and brought it to the following class session where they had a brief class discussion about it. Specifically, Dr. Ryan asked if any of the students had found the questions difficult to answer and if there were any questions that they had felt strongly about (Narrative 1/18/2007).

During the next class session, Dr. Ryan provided the preservice teachers with a comprehensive list of their answers, asked them to read it over individually, discuss their thoughts with another student in class, and then share those thoughts with the class (Narrative 1/23/2007). Near the end of the semester, Dr. Ryan revisited the comprehensive list by asking students what they felt firmly belonged on the list, what they would add to the list, and what they would remove from the list (Narrative 4/17/2007). During these discussions, some students addressed the issue of play. For instance, during an early class discussion about the IIECE activity:

*Dr. Ryan asked if anyone felt strongly about any of their answers. Kate indicated that she felt strongly about the role that play serves. Joan stated that she also felt strongly about play. She discussed using games with children and how she remembered playing "Around the World" as a child. She suggested that when*

*play is incorporated into the classroom, children not only can learn from it (e.g. letters and numbers), but they can also build social skills...* (Narrative 1/18/2007). Thus, the issue of play was not only addressed in the written activity itself, but (also) during class discussions about it.

In addition to the IIECE assignment, students addressed play in their formal written child study. During the semester, each preservice teacher chose a child in their field placement to study. When visiting their placement classroom the preservice teachers took field notes on their child study student. And, during the university based portion of the course the preservice teachers discussed what they were learning about their child study students. At times, during these discussions, the issue of play arose. For instance, during one class session, Dr. Ryan asked students to complete a fast write on the following questions: *(a) what do you know about your child's preferences, activities and interests, and (b) what if any challenges did you encounter trying to determine those preferences, activities and interests?* (Narrative 3/08/2007). After completing their fast write, students paired up to discuss what they had written. Then, they shared their ideas during a large group discussion. During this large group discussion, some of the students addressed how play was structured in their placement classrooms, for instance:

*Joan stated that children in her placement only get to play "if you finish" and indicated that there was "a group that didn't get to play at all." In addition, she noted that there were only a certain number of spots at each center and children placed their sticks at the center to claim their spot. She found that when center time occurred there was a "mad dash" to the centers. And, she suggested that this sometimes led to children having "hurt feelings," because some children felt like other children didn't want to play with them if there weren't enough spots at a center* (Narrative 3/08/2007).

At the end of the semester, the students turned in a formal written paper describing their child study student, addressing questions that remained about that child, reflecting on the experience of conducting a child study and describing how it might inform their future practice. In their final papers, I found that the preservice teachers addressed play in one of two ways. First, some of the preservice teachers discussed their beliefs about play in

the reflection portion of their papers. For instance, one of the preservice teachers concluded her paper by stating:

*We discussed play a lot in class. I realized while watching Georgie [her child study student] that lack of play can really limit expression in the classroom. It is harder to get to know students if they don't have the liberty of being free to imagine and play* (2007, Lisa's final paper).

Second, some of the preservice teachers described the context of their field placements and provided information about whether and how children engaged in play in their classrooms.

In addition to surfacing their beliefs about play through written assignments, the preservice teachers had multiple opportunities to read about and discuss play in Dr. Ryan's course. The course readings addressing play, provided by Dr. Ryan on her syllabus: (a) explored the purposes of play (Cooper, 1993; Dorrell, 2004; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (b) described how to create a context for classroom play (Cooper, 1993; Dorrell, 2004; Johnson et al., 1999; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (c) illustrated the teacher's role in play (Cooper, 1993; Johnson et al., 1999; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (d) addressed issues that may arise during play, such as exclusion (Katch, 2001, 2003; Paley 1992); and (e) described specific types of play, such as violent play (Katch, 2001) and oral dictation and dramatization (Cooper, 1993; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992). During class discussions, Dr. Ryan helped the preservice teachers surface their understanding of the course texts by asking open ended questions, creating space for them to discuss their personal experiences, and encouraging them to discuss whether and how the ideas in the text might inform their work with young children. The course discussion on Paley (1992), which examined a classroom rule barring kindergarten children from excluding one another during play, provides a case in point (Narrative 3/01/2007). During that class session, Dr. Ryan began the discussion by inviting the preservice teachers to share childhood experiences in which they were excluded as a child or in which they had excluded another child. Next, the discussion moved to the text

itself and Dr. Ryan asked students to make arguments for and against Paley's rule. Finally, Dr. Ryan invited students to share whether and why they supported Paley's rule.

Beyond discussing the course readings, course discussions also explored the preservice teachers' field placements. These discussions not only provided descriptive evidence for what play looked like in the preservice teachers' field placement classrooms, they also demonstrated the preservice teachers' impressions of their field placements and play in general. At times, class discussions focused on the field placement alone while at other times discussions about the students' field placements occurred while discussing course readings. For instance, when discussing Johnson et al. (1999), which explored how teachers can facilitate play in the classroom, some of the preservice teachers raised concerns about the materials provided to the children in their field placements. For instance, one of the preservice teachers, Joan stated, "*I'm in a pre-k classroom and there's a house area, but I never see them use it*" (Narrative 3/08/2007). Thus, during the university-based component of the course, the preservice teachers had multiple opportunities to write, to read and to discuss their beliefs about play.

### ***Field-Based Component of Course***

In addition to the university-based component of the course, Dr. Ryan's course also had a field-based component. During 11 weeks of the 14 week semester, students spent 1.5 hours per week in a prekindergarten or a kindergarten class at Stowe Academy, a public inner city charter school serving students from pre-kindergarten through grade 8 and whose student body was 4% African American, 87% Hispanic, 8% White, and 1% Asian (TEA, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> In addition, 90% of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged and 21% were identified as Limited English Proficiency (TEA, n.d.). According to the school's website, the school's curriculum was based on the state mandated Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum. As one of Hawkins University's six Professional Development

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<sup>3</sup> To protect Stowe's anonymity, demographic information is a close representation of the school's student population, but not exact.



Schools (PDS), Stowe Academy had a formal relationship with Hawkins University's teacher preparation program.

The 13 students in Dr. Ryan's course were placed in one of five early childhood classrooms at Stowe Academy including one pre-kindergarten classroom and four kindergarten classrooms. Accordingly, between two to four preservice teachers were in each field placement classroom. Because I did not observe teaching practices at Stowe Academy first-hand, my description of the field placement classrooms come from the participants' course discussions, interviews, and written assignments. It is important to note that the preservice teachers only spent 1.5 hours one day per week in their field placement classroom. Thus, their descriptions of their field placement classrooms only represent a snapshot and not an entire portrait of those classrooms.

According to the preservice teachers, during their field visits they observed several types of activities. First, the preservice teachers placed in the kindergarten classrooms observed auxiliary classes, such as P.E., music, and/or art; large group activities; and centers. The following description by one of the preservice teachers illustrates the type of activities the preservice teachers observed in the kindergarten classrooms:

*Kate:* [When we arrive] ...they are in their, I don't know what, their auxiliary? I guess you'd say. We've been to music class three times, and P.E. once. So they come back from that, and that's what starts them off early in the morning...Today was actually unusual because they skipped auxiliary because it's a TAKS day and they switched with the fourth graders. Ordinarily, they would come back and they would all sit on the carpet and settle down. They would do the News of the Week. So, it's sort of this free open time to discuss with the students in a classroom setting I feel like. Then, there's a short instructional period. They'll go over calendar, days of the week, or reading or something like that. And then, it's guided practice. So, she'll go to the board and show the students exactly what she wants them to do and then she releases them into groups and so there's a set group throughout the year. And I'm sure that some of that changes, but for the most part the bananas are the bananas and the racecars are the racecars. And so they'll go

to their own separate table with an idea of what they have to do. And, the way it works with four of us in the classroom is that each of us is at a table... [So], it starts with instructional, and then guided, and then application. And then we usually leave about halfway into their activity (2007, Kate's interview).

According to the data, each of the other kindergarten placement classrooms had a similar pattern of activity as the one described by Kate.

In contrast to the kindergarten placements, the two preservice teachers in the prekindergarten placement did not observe auxiliary classes. Instead, during their visits, they only observed large group activities and center activities. A class discussion about their field placement classroom illustrates these activities in greater detail:

*Describing their prekindergarten placement, Joan stated that the teacher "does the same thing everyday" and that she and Lisa "don't see art, music, or P.E." Then she described how the children focus on writing their letters in the writing center.*

*Lisa added that they also have a "theme center" that focuses on "farm animals." She indicated that in the center the children have "sheets with different animals. They color different rows everyday and cut them out." Then, she added that the children paste matching animals together, for instance, they "put goat on goat." Lisa continued by stating she and Joan had also seen the children "eat breakfast" and have "carpet time" and "calendar."*

*Joan added that the children also do some counting in the morning by counting who is present and who is absent.*

*Lisa then stated that after the large group activity, children "break off into centers" (Narrative 3/01/2008).*

Thus, during their field visit the two preservice teachers placed in the prekindergarten classroom saw informal activities, such as eating breakfast; teacher-directed activities, such as calendar; and center activities.

With regard to play, the preservice teachers in Dr. Ryan's course indicated that they observed play activities in their field placement classrooms and that these activities were used as a reward for completed work or as a tool for classroom management. For

instance, Rose's description of her kindergarten placement classroom during a class discussion illustrates the common manner in which play seemed to be implemented during the preservice teachers' field visits:

*Rose stated that the children are "on the rug for a large amount of time." And, she noted that the first time she observed centers was this week. She described the structure of the classroom as being similar to the structure of Kindergarten Placement A because "they [the children] can play afterwards," that is, once they had finished their work (Narrative 3/08/2007).*

Thus, across the placement classrooms, the preservice teachers seem to have observed a nonplay approach to incorporating play into the classroom (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

During their field visits the students observed, took notes and interacted with the children in their placements. In addition, at the end of the semester all 13 students in the course taught an oral dictation and dramatization unit. Referred to as *story play* or *story dictation* by Isenberg and Jalongo (1997), oral dictation and dramatization:

...is a form of guided drama that uses children's own stories as the content for enactment (Paley, 1981). In this kind of drama children can be both writers and actors by dictating stories to an adult or by writing their own stories that later become plays to dramatize. As the authors, children choose which of their friends might play certain roles as the teacher reads the original stories (p. 185).

As a foundation for the project, the preservice teachers read and discussed three texts. First, they read Paley (1992), which beyond exploring issues of exclusion during play, demonstrated what oral dictation and dramatization might look like in an early childhood classroom. In addition, they read McLane and McNamee (1990), which provided a portrait of how one kindergarten teacher enacted oral dictation and dramatization in her classroom and illustrated the connection between this activity and children's literacy development. Finally, the preservice teachers read Cooper (1993) which discussed why teachers should include oral dictation and dramatization in their classrooms and provided a step-by-step guide for implementing it. Then, after discussing these readings in class, Dr. Ryan demonstrated an oral dictation and dramatization lesson in which she took on the role of the early childhood teacher and the preservice teachers took on the role of the

early childhood student. Next, the preservice teachers submitted to Dr. Ryan a written plan outlining how they would teach their oral dictation and dramatization lessons to the children in their field-placement classrooms. And, finally, the preservice teachers taught their oral dictation and dramatization lessons to a small group of children in their field placement class. In the next section, I describe the preservice teachers who participated in this study.

## **Participants**

Because the goal of purposeful sampling is “to discover, understand, and gain insight” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61) into the issue under study, researchers need to ensure they “select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Accordingly, over the course of the semester I refined my sample to include participants that met this criterion. Specifically, I recruited participants for this study on the first day of Dr. Ryan’s course, January 11, 2007. During the class session, I provided students with an overview of the study and invited them to participate in each portion of the data collection process. The three portions included participating in an interview, allowing me to take field notes on their conversations during class, and allowing me to photocopy their informal and formal written assignments. Then, I gave each student a consent form and asked them to indicate which portions of the study, if any, they would agree to participate in.

Dr. Ryan and all 13 students in the course allowed me to observe and take field notes during the university-based portion of the class. Twelve of the students allowed me to photocopy their writing assignments, and 10 students initially agreed to participate in the one-on-one interview. Prior to conducting the one-on-one interview, two of the preservice teachers indicated that they did not have sufficient time to meet with me and elected to withdraw from that portion of the study. In addition, I chose to exclude one of the students because she did not fit one of the underlying criteria of the study, namely, she was not a preservice teacher. Instead, she was a psychology major completing the course as an elective.

To increase my ability “to discover, understand, and gain insight” into the study’s research questions, I further refined my sample during the data collection process. Specifically, although all three data sources—interviews, direct observation, and document analysis—provided insight into the preservice teachers’ beliefs, the one-on-one interviews provided the richest information on the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play and what had influenced their beliefs. Thus, the interview data provided the foundation for my analysis and I used the other two data sources—direct observations and document analysis—to provide confirming and disconfirming evidence for what I learned during the interviews. Because of the centrality of the interview data, I chose to focus on the seven preservice teachers in Dr. Ryan’s course—Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary and Kate—who provided their informed consent to participate in all three portions of the study including, interview, field note observations, and document analysis.

As Glesne (1999) noted, pseudonyms alone “do not necessarily protect participants” (p. 121). Accordingly, I have chosen to describe the seven preservice teachers in the aggregate. Specifically, given the small sample size and because certain characteristics, such as ethnicity, were unique to an individual preservice teacher, connecting certain demographic information with an individual preservice teacher’s pseudonym would inadvertently lessen that preservice teacher’s anonymity.

All seven participants were female and were 18 years of age or older. In terms of ethnicity, four preservice teachers described themselves as Caucasian; one preservice teacher described herself as Jewish and Caucasian; one preservice teacher described herself as Black; and one preservice teacher described herself as being adopted from China by an American mother and a Belgian father. In addition, the latter preservice teacher noted that she had been raised and educated in Texas throughout her life. Among the seven preservice teachers, five were sophomores, one was a first year, and one was a senior. In addition, all seven preservice teachers planned to complete one of Hawkins University’s certification programs and afterwards planned to pursue a career in teaching. Specifically, five of the preservice teachers planned to complete the early childhood through grade 4 certification program, one of the preservice teachers planned to complete the grades 4 through 8 certification program, and one of the preservice teachers planned

to complete either the early childhood through grade 4 certification program or the grades 4 through 8 certification program. If given a choice, after graduation, five of the seven preservice teachers planned to pursue careers working with children in early childhood education. Of the other two, one planned to teach in the upper elementary grades, and the other planned to teach in middle school. Each of the preservice teachers had completed some educational coursework at Hawkins University. Although some of the students' previous coursework had focused on early childhood development and discussed play tangentially in that context; Dr. Ryan's course was the first course they had taken at Hawkins University that explicitly addressed play in great detail.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

In keeping with this study's basic qualitative research methodology (Merriam, 1998) and with the data collection techniques suggested for research on beliefs (Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998), I employed multiple forms of data collection. Specifically, I used one-on-one interviews, direct observations, and document analysis to explore the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs. In the sections that follow, I discuss each data collection tool and its connection to the study's stated research questions.

### **Interview**

Because interviews allow access to "how respondents think or feel about something" and provide valuable insights into "...the affective and cognitive underpinnings of your respondents' perceptions" (Glesne, 1999, p.93), I conducted a 60-minute, audio-taped, one-on-one interview with each of the seven preservice teachers. Interviewing the participants provided the most direct insights into their beliefs about play and the influences that had shaped their beliefs. Because I wanted to address the preservice teachers' field placements during their interview, I waited to meet with them until several weeks into the semester. At that point, each preservice teacher had been to her field placement at least twice.

During the interview, I used a semi-structured format in which I created a tentative list of interview questions that I asked each preservice teacher (Merriam, 1998). Based on participants' responses as the interview proceeded I added and transformed questions as necessary (Merriam, 1998). The central focus of the interview was an activity in which I asked the preservice teachers to develop a list of items that might occur in a pre-kindergarten or kindergarten classroom. This activity was open-ended, in that there was no time limit and the preservice teachers could write down as many items as they wished, thus the total number of items written down by each preservice teacher varied ( $M=14$ ,  $Mdn=14$ ,  $range=8$  to  $24$ ). The preservice teachers seemed to include two types of items on their lists, namely, general activities, such as *games*, *dance*, and *music* and specific activities, such as *looking around while in the hallway*, *shapes (i.e. geometry activity involving art)*, and *counting to 100 by 1's, 2's, 5's, and 10's*. In addition, one of the preservice teachers, Joan, also included personal dispositions, such as *fun* and *hurt feelings*, and contextual characteristics, such as *structured*, *numbered*, and *not enough time*. Next, I asked the preservice teachers to label as *play* or *not play* the items on their self-generated list and a separate list of 52 items that I had given to them. Similar to their own self-generated lists, the list of 52 items that I gave to the preservice teachers included general activities, such as *science center* and *painting* and specific activities, such as *participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another*, and *cutting out magazine pictures that begin with the letter B* (See Appendix A and Appendix B for categorized activities).

Beyond the two categories that I initially suggested, the preservice teachers on their own or based on my suggestion created a third category, which I will refer to as *middle*. Their use of this category unfolded in one of three ways: (a) one of the preservice teachers, on her own while categorizing the activities, marked individual activities to indicate that they fell into a separate category other than play or not play, (b) three of the preservice teachers asked if they could use a third category besides play or not play when organizing the activities and (c) three of the preservice teachers neither created nor asked to create a third category; however, during the course of our interview I asked them if they wanted to place activities in a middle category and each of the three chose to do so.

The preservice teachers seemed to categorize activities as middle if they perceived an activity to be play under certain conditions and not play under other conditions and/or if they perceived an activity to embody the qualities of both play and not play. Using their categorized activities as a reference, I asked the preservice teachers follow-up questions about their beliefs about play and the influences on their beliefs. For consistency throughout the remainder of the dissertation I use *play*, *not play*, and *middle* to describe the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Although these terms are somewhat awkward, they most clearly reflect the language used during our discussions.

Following each interview, I created a word-for-word transcription of it. To improve the readability of the transcripts and to encourage participants' focus on the content of their interview statements, I created a second transcript in which "filler" words (e.g. "um," "uh," etc.) were removed. I emailed each preservice teacher the "cleaned-up" version of her transcript and informed her of these modifications. In addition, at the end of the semester, I invited each preservice teacher to participate in a member-check session where they verified the accuracy of the ideas that they presented during their interview and they responded to clarifying questions. All seven preservice teachers chose to meet with me. These meetings lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were audio-taped and transcribed.

### **Direct Observation**

Because direct observations provide researchers with information about and an understanding of a research context and its participants (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998), during the 14-week semester, I attended each on-campus session of Dr. Ryan's course. While collecting this data, I adopted the observer as participant role (Glesne, 1999). In this role, some interaction with participants may occur, such as informal conversations before or after class; however, the main function is observing. Over the course of the semester, I took field notes chronologically, paying particular attention to students' verbal communication about play (Glesne, 1999). Because Dr. Ryan's course included a focus on play and emphasized student-centered discussions, the preservice teachers had opportunities to discuss their beliefs about play and to address



influences on their beliefs. Following each class session, I used my field notes to create a detailed and a substantive narrative that reflected my observations.

### **Document Analysis**

Two benefits of document analysis include (a) “supporting, expanding, and challenging your [the researcher’s] portrayals and perceptions” (Glesne, 1999), and (b) acting as a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and view of the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 116). Thus, in conjunction with directly observing Dr. Ryan’s course, I collected and analyzed two written course assignments. In the first writing assignment, Initial Ideas about Early Childhood Education (IIECE), the preservice teachers described whether and how they would implement play in their future early childhood classroom. In the second writing assignment, each preservice teacher wrote a detailed child study of a student in her placement class. Within this assignment each student addressed play by discussing her beliefs about it in the reflection portion of the paper and/or by describing whether and how children engaged in play in her field placement classroom. Thus, these two writing assignments provided a first-person perspective on the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Because of the ongoing nature of data collection, data analysis occurred throughout the course of the study (Glesne, 1999). The data analysis process consisted of three components, namely, *description*, *analysis*, and *interpretation* (Wolcott, 1994, 2001).<sup>4</sup> After providing an overview of these three features of data transformation, I describe how I interwove these elements during the data analysis process.

### **Overview: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation**

With *description* the researcher stays “close to the data as originally recorded” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). According to Wolcott, in “the very act of constructing *data* out of

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<sup>4</sup> As described by Wolcott (1994), *data analysis* will be used as an umbrella term that includes description, analysis, and interpretation.

*experience*, the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background” (p. 13). During the data analysis process, I used three descriptive approaches described by Wolcott: (a) *researcher order*, in which I wrote about my understanding of the data as it unfolded for me; (b) *chronological order*, in which I wrote temporal accounts of the data; and (c) *following an analytic framework*, in which I imposed an external “structure on the descriptive account” (p. 20), by using literature on play, beliefs, and preservice teachers’ beliefs.

With *analysis*, the researcher identifies “essential features and systematic description of interrelationships among them” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12). According to Wolcott, this component of qualitative research “is the more orderly, less speculative side of data transformation” (p. 26). During the data analysis process, I used four analytic approaches suggested by Wolcott: (a) *identifying patterns*, in which I identified categories and themes within the data; (b) *displaying findings*, in which I used tables to organize the categories that I had identified; (c) *highlighting findings*, in which I unpacked categories and themes by highlighting specific information within them; and (d) *contextualizing findings in an analytic framework*, in which I tied my findings to literature on play, beliefs, and preservice teachers’ beliefs.

With *interpretation*, “the researcher transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe what is to be made of them” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 36). Specifically, interpretation explores the question “What is to be made of it all?” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12). During the data analysis process, I used two interpretive approaches suggested by Wolcott: (a) *turning to theory*, in which I interpreted my findings in the broader context of literature on play, beliefs, and preservice teachers’ beliefs; and (b) *listening to gatekeepers*, in which I drew on the advice of more knowledgeable others to add to, to delete, or to change developing interpretations.

Although I described each component separately, description, analysis, and interpretation work in concert to assist the researcher in transforming her data (Wolcott, 1994). Because data transformation is not an exact science, within a study data analysis unfolds in a unique manner (Wolcott, 1994). In the next section, I describe the process I used to transform the data for this study.

## **Data Transformation Process**

During the data transformation process, I interwove elements of description, analysis and interpretation. In the early going, I maintained a descriptive account of how I was making sense of the collected data and began the analysis process by identifying initial patterns within the data. Specifically, each week I read the collected data and recorded my reflections, insights, and speculations in an analytic memo (Glesne, 1999). In addition, I began sorting my data into four broad categories based on the study's initial research questions (Glesne, 1999): (a) beliefs about the role of play in early childhood education; (b) beliefs about the role of play in the emotional, social, and cognitive learning domains; (c) beliefs about the teacher's role in children's play; and (d) beliefs about how previous experiences have shaped beliefs about play. As the study progressed, I began to generate subcategories within each research question and to display these findings in tables (Glesne, 1999; Wolcott, 1994).

Organizing my data in this fashion led me to revise my research questions and, in turn, to further refine the categories that I used to organize my data (Merriam, 1998). First, based on interview data I found that the preservice teachers connected play with a broader range of developmental domains than emotional, social, and cognitive alone. For instance, as I categorized the data I found that the preservice teachers also suggested that play encouraged physical, communicative, and cultural learning and development. So, I broadened this research question to include play's role in learning and development generally. Second, based on interview data I also found that the preservice teachers' descriptions of what had shaped their beliefs about play went beyond their previous experiences. Specifically, they also described feelings, ideals, and course-related experiences as influencing their beliefs. Therefore, I broadened and refined this research question in the following manner: What do the preservice teachers believe influenced their beliefs about play? And, how do these influences appear to have shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play? Finally, I spent a significant amount of time during the interview exploring how the preservice teachers defined play. Given the centrality of this data, I added the following research question: What do preservice teachers believe constitutes play? As I refined my research questions, I continued to

refine the categories within them by deleting, conflating, and renaming them to ensure the developing categories effectively addressed the research questions themselves (Merriam, 1998).

As the data transformation process progressed, I continued to refine my categories and to display these patterns in tables. In addition, I also wrote descriptive accounts of individual preservice teachers' beliefs about play. For instance, I wrote individual descriptive portraits of their beliefs about play's role in learning and development. Through this process, I identified an initial theme across the data, namely that the preservice teachers' beliefs about play seemed inconsistent. Within this theme, I identified several categories, such as (a) *play is freely-chosen/sometimes children don't get to choose*; (b) *play is process-oriented/sometimes play has outcomes*; (c) *play involves positive affect/sometimes play isn't fun*; (d) *play supports learning and development/sometimes play doesn't support learning and development*; (e) *teachers have a limited role in play/sometimes teachers intervene in play*; (f) *play should be included in the early childhood classroom/sometimes play is excluded from the early childhood classroom*. Using these categories as a framework, I wrote a descriptive account of the inconsistencies across the preservice teacher' beliefs and developed an initial interpretation, namely that the preservice teachers seemed to have "play-like" beliefs which embedded contradictory notions about it. Feedback that I received on this initial account indicated that these categories could be further refined and that doing so might lead to new interpretations of them.

Returning to my data, I continued the process of identifying and refining categories, displaying these findings in tables, and writing descriptive accounts of how I was making sense of the data. During this period, it was suggested that I expand my analytic framework to include Vygotsky (1986). The process of reading Vygotsky's work and writing individual chronological accounts of the preservice teachers' definitions of play led me to identify new categories, namely, *unique and overlapping*, *steady and evolving*, and *multiple meanings and emphasis*. Using these additional categories, I wrote a descriptive account of each and developed a new interpretation, namely, that the preservice teachers' beliefs about play seemed uncertain.

Based on feedback that I received on this draft and Wolcott's (1994) suggestion that using analytical frameworks and relevant theory supports the transformation of data, I combined two frameworks—Vygotsky (1986) and Nesper (1987)—to further analyze my data. According to Wolcott (1994), frameworks such as these act as a lens and provide structure for identifying and discussing salient features of the study's findings (Wolcott, 1994). Using Vygotsky (1986) and Nesper (1987) as a framework allowed me to organize, extend, explain and highlight portions of my previous data analysis. Specifically, it led me to generate two main themes and corollary subthemes that addressed the study's research questions (Merriam, 1998). The first theme, *foundations of preservice teachers' beliefs about play*, addressed two subthemes (a) *everyday and classroom experiences* and (b) *beyond experience: affective evaluative loading, alternativity, and existential presumption*. The second theme, *content of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play*, addressed two subthemes (a) *non-consensuality and multiple meanings of play* and (b) *unboundedness: fluctuating and contradictory beliefs about play*. Each of these themes will be discussed in greater detail in *Chapter 4: Findings*.

## **QUALITY AND RIGOR**

Several steps were taken to increase this study's quality and to demonstrate its rigor. Given the interpretivist paradigm which guided this study's data collection and analysis, I focused on strengthening its trustworthiness/credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998). In the following section, each test for quality and rigor is discussed in turn.

### **Trustworthiness/Credibility**

According to Wolcott (1990) the notion of internal validity—that is, the extent to which researchers effectively measure their research variables (Merriam, 1998)—does not align with qualitative research in which the researcher focuses on understanding the people, places, and ideas under study. Thus, qualitative research concerns itself with credibility and trustworthiness (Glesne, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998), that is, the extent to which “there is a correspondence between the way the respondents

actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoint” (Mertens, 1998, p. 181). To increase the credibility/trustworthiness of this study, I used three commonly cited techniques including data triangulation (Glesne, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), member-checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998), and peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998; Moss, 1994).

Data triangulation “involves checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data” (Mertens, 1998, p. 182). Accordingly, I used multiple sources of data to support my findings (Glesne, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Specifically, because the preservice teachers’ one-on-one interviews provided the richest information, the interview data provided the foundation for my data analysis. Then, I used the other two data sources—direct observations and document analysis—to provide confirming and disconfirming evidence for what I learned during the interviews.

Next, I attempted to enhance trustworthiness/credibility by conducting member-checks with the participants. With member-checking, the researcher attempts to “verify with the respondent groups the constructions that are developing as a result of data collected and analyzed” (Mertens, 1998, p. 182). I conducted two member-checks with participants. First, I emailed each preservice teacher the transcript from our interview. Then, at the end of the semester, I invited each preservice teacher to participate in a member-check session. During this session, the preservice teachers had the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the ideas that they presented during their interview and to respond to clarifying questions. All seven preservice teachers chose to meet with me.

Second, I emailed an early draft of my findings to all seven preservice teachers. Two of the preservice teachers, Jane and Mary, read and responded to the draft. Jane emailed a brief response stating “It looks fantastic! I figured out which pseudonym I am... Congratulations on finishing the draft” (2007, Jane’s member-check email). Mary sent a longer response in which, like Jane, she congratulated me on finishing the draft. In addition, she noted that she enjoyed participating in the process and expressed appreciation for how I had tied the preservice teachers’ beliefs to literature on play. She stated, “...when the professional literature is paired with preservice teachers’ opinions it

gives us a feeling of validity and comfort that our opinions are not silly or far-fetched” (2007, Mary’s member-check email). Finally, she suggested that the interview process itself may have influenced the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play more generally. She stated, “Each one of us continuously were developing our values and opinions throughout those interviews. I think you truly encapsulated the gist of what we were thinking and talking out loud about” (2007, Mary’s member-check email). Neither Jane nor Mary raised concerns about or recommended revisions to the draft.

Finally, I attempted to enhance trustworthiness/credibility by engaging in peer debriefing. According to Moss (1994), researchers should not base their interpretations on their analysis of the data alone, but (also) on “...a rational debate among a community of interpreters” (p. 7). In line with this suggestion, I discussed the data collection and data analysis process and shared my findings with both individuals knowledgeable about the topic of study and with those outside the educational community who were less familiar with the topic. Doing so provided new insight into my findings. For instance, one debriefing conference led me to consider Vygotsky (1986) as a secondary framework for this study.

### **Dependability**

Because change is expected in qualitative research, I focused on increasing the study’s dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 1998). As Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted, “changes and shifts are hallmarks of a maturing—and successful—inquiry” (p. 243). In planning this study, I developed a comprehensive proposal describing the data collection and data analysis process. However, during the course of the study, I made adjustments to ensure that data collection and analysis procedures fully supported the study’s purpose, such as choosing to expand the study’s analytic framework and to revise research questions. To enhance the study’s dependability, throughout the research process I kept a record of these changes as they occurred (Mertens, 1998).

## **Transferability**

This study's basic qualitative methodology, including its small sample size, makes generalizing its findings difficult. As such, while transforming my data, I focused on enhancing the transferability of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (1989) define transferability as "...an empirical process for checking the degree of similarity between sending and receiving contexts" (p. 241). In addition, unlike generalizability where "the burden of proof for claimed generalizability is on the *inquirer*...the burden of proof for claimed transferability is on the *receiver*" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 241). To enhance transferability, researchers use *thick description* by providing "extensive and careful description" of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 241). Accordingly, throughout my findings I provided multiple examples and significant detail for each of my claims (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998).

## **Confirmability**

With confirmability, the researcher describes how "data, interpretations, and outcomes are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the evaluator and are not simply figments of the evaluator's imagination" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 243). To enhance confirmability, Mertens (1998) suggests that researchers clearly demonstrate the connection between the findings and the collected data. Accordingly, within the findings I cited relevant data sources. For instance, when quoting a preservice teacher, I included the date, name, and whether the evidence came from the interview, the member-check meetings, the narrative of my field notes, the two written artifacts, or the member-check emails. In turn, those citations connect to the filing system that I created for my raw data so that data could be traced back to its source.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Beyond the ethical requirements outlined by federally-mandated, university-based Institutional Review Boards (Glesne, 1999), I took other ethical considerations into account while conducting this study. Specifically, because I am an alumna, former full-



time employee, and occasional part-time employee of Hawkins University, I attempted to address the problems that can occur in *backyard research*, that is, research conducted in an overly familiar setting (Glesne, 1999). First, because a researcher who studies at a familiar site may have assumptions about it, certain behaviors may go unnoticed by the researcher (Glesne, 1999). Because of this, I conducted a pilot study in Dr. Ryan's early childhood practicum course in the spring of 2005 prior to conducting this current study in the spring of 2007. Although based on my past full-time employment at Hawkins University, I was familiar with the general content and structure of the course prior to the pilot study; I had not taken the course as an undergraduate myself. Thus, I found that I had few assumptions about what students themselves might think, say or do during the semester. Instead, through analysis of my pilot study data, I determined that the practicum course was a rich source of data for the study of preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

Beyond restrictions from entering assumptions, problems may arise from the multiple roles backyard researchers play, such as employee, teacher and researcher (Glesne, 1999). According to Glesne (1999), when an individual adds the researcher role onto another already established role at a research site, she "may experience confusion at times over which role [she is] or should be playing" (p. 26). To account for this potential problem, I was not employed by the university during the semester that I collected data for this study. Moreover, although five of the seven preservice teachers were former students of mine, none of the preservice teachers in this study were students of mine at any point during the course of this study. Because I was not actively responsible for the participants and their learning and given that I was not employed by the university during the data collection process, I did not have to grapple with playing the multiple roles of employee, teacher and researcher during the course of the study.

Finally, Glesne (1999) cautioned that while conducting backyard studies, researchers may obtain *dangerous knowledge*, which she defined as "...information that is politically risky to hold, particularly for an insider" (p. 27). In addition, the researcher may grapple with the political consequences arising from deciding which data to collect and to report. Because this study focused on students and their beliefs about play and not

on the quality of the course, department, or professor's instruction and given my limited role at the university itself, I did not encounter these dilemmas during the research process.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I described the research design used to explore the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences that shaped those beliefs. In line with the interpretivist paradigm that framed this study, I used a basic qualitative methodology together with corollary data collection and data analysis approaches to surface and identify the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs. Additionally, I followed specific guidelines for enhancing the study's quality and ensuring ethical research practices. In the next chapter, I present the findings identified through this research design.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present findings for this study's research questions:

1. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in early childhood education?
  - a. What do preservice teachers believe constitutes play?
  - b. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in learning and development?
  - c. What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the teacher's role in play?
2. What do the preservice teachers believe influenced their beliefs about play?

And, how do these influences appear to have shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play?

To organize the presentation of data and related discussion, I have combined two frameworks: (a) Vygotsky's (1986) conceptual development framework and (b) Nespor's (1987) beliefs framework. In the first section, *Foundations of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Play*, I examine the influences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and I discuss how they lay the foundation for the structure of their beliefs. In the second section, *Content of the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Play*, using the structural elements of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, I examine the content of their beliefs and I discuss how those structural elements may signify a developmental milestone in the preservice teachers' conceptualization of play.

### FOUNDATIONS OF THE PRESERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY

Although Vygotsky (1986) did not explicitly address beliefs, his notion of conceptual development and Nespor's (1987) beliefs framework complement one another because they not only share a common feature, namely that experience plays a central role in the development of thinking, they also refine and extend one another (see Figure 1). Specifically, Vygotsky's (1986) work refines Nespor's (1987) by distinguishing

between two distinct types of experiences, *everyday* and *classroom*, while Nespor's (1987) work extends Vygotsky's (1986) by looking beyond experience to incorporate three other features that influence beliefs including affective and evaluative loading (i.e. feelings), alternativity (i.e. ideals), and existential presumption (i.e. universal assumptions). For both Vygotsky (1986) and Nespor (1987), these influences laid the foundation for the structure of an individual's thinking.

This section has been divided into three parts. In the first, *Everyday and Classroom Experiences*, I describe the experiences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and how these experiences seemed to influence their beliefs. In the second, *Beyond Experience: Affective and Evaluative Loading, Alternativity and Existential Presumption*; I describe influences outside of experience that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the effect of those influences on their beliefs. Finally, in the section's conclusion, *The Relationship between the Foundations of Beliefs and their Structure*, I discuss the connection between the foundations of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and their structural elements.

### **Everyday and Classroom Experiences**

Both Nespor (1987) and Vygotsky (1986) suggested that experience influences the development of an individual's thinking. Nespor (1987) referred to experience as *episodic storage* and suggested that "critical episodes" throughout people's lives shape their beliefs (p. 320). Like Nespor, Vygotsky (1986) also suggested that experiences influence thinking, however, he extended Nespor's (1987) work by describing two distinct types of experiences, *everyday* and *classroom* experiences, which he believed led to two types of conceptual development, *spontaneous* and *scientific*. Vygotsky (1986) suggested that spontaneous concepts develop informally through everyday experiences and are "situational, empirical, and practical" (p. 194) while scientific concepts develop formally through systematic instruction and are "conscious and deliberate" (p. 194). For Vygotsky, the structural differences between spontaneous and scientific concepts allow them to have a symbiotic relationship; specifically, spontaneous concepts work their way

up through scientific concepts and scientific concepts work their way down through spontaneous concepts.

In line with Vygotsky (1986), the preservice teachers believed both everyday and classroom experiences had influenced their beliefs about play. Moreover, these experiences seemed to have a symbiotic relationship in which the preservice teachers used their beliefs about play developed from their everyday experiences to evaluate their classroom experiences, and they used their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs. After providing an overview of the experiences that the preservice teachers cited as shaping their beliefs about play, I describe the influence these experiences seemed to have on their beliefs.

### ***Overview of Experiences***

The preservice teachers described both types of Vygotskian (1986) experiences, *everyday* and *classroom*, as influencing their beliefs about play. Table 1 summarizes these experiences. The first column lists the two broader categories of experiences suggested by Vygotsky (1986), *everyday* and *classroom*, and the individual types of experiences that I identified as falling within these categories. The second column lists the number of preservice teachers who cited a particular experience as shaping her beliefs about play while the third column lists the individual preservice teachers who utilized each experience. For consistency, the preservice teachers' names are listed in the following order: Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary and Kate. In the fourth column, I have presented examples of the preservice teachers' explanations of why a particular experience had shaped their beliefs about play. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather brief illustrations of the preservice teachers' descriptions.

Table 1: Experiences Influencing Beliefs About Play

Categories	No.	List of preservice teachers	Examples
Everyday Experiences	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	

Childhood experiences	n=6	Lisa, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	"I just think [my own childhood] experience is the one thing that you have that just seems the strongest for me. I can say this happened to me and I felt this way and you can draw on that when you are relating it to kids in your classroom" (2007, Lisa's member-check).
Previous experience before college assisting in an early childhood classroom	n=4	Jane, Joan, Mary, Kate	"I worked extensively in a special program at home that is a special education [program], but it's a multiply impaired program with three and four year olds. And, while they aren't learning academics they are learning life skills. And, I think that especially in kindergarten or elementary school I think learning academics shouldn't be the only basis of the day. I think that learning life skills like learning how to use a computer or learning how to interact with others or, stuff like that as a three and four year old, playing. I think that in kindergarten there is already so much pressure and whether or not they learn their numbers to 100 is not going to determine the rest of their life" (2007, Joan's member-check).
Informal experiences interacting with children	n=3	Lisa, Sue, Kate	"I have cousins and siblings and they're really small and I can...I'll tell them 'you need to go read,' and they'll go 'Ahhh' [ <i>in a disappointed voice</i> ]. And so, I know for them that's not play. But, I'll tell them 'you can go watch T.V.' and they're like, 'Yes!' Play for my sisters would also be like art things. I don't know if that is for everybody, but I think for most kids. It's just something you don't have to think about as much, it's just free. They'll be like 'can I borrow your paint?' and then if I say 'Yes,' they'll be like 'Yes!' and so that would be play for them" (2007, Sue's member-check).
Paid experiences working with children	n=2	Lisa, Kate	"My TAE class [ <i>a weekend class for gifted and talented children that she teaches</i> ] has also sort of opened my eyes to what's fun and what's not and what they [children] like in the classroom and what they don't" (2007, Kate's member-check).
<b>Classroom Experiences</b>	<b>n=7</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate</b>	
Spring 2007 discussions in Dr. Ryan's course	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	"Course discussions, it's just when you are talking about things you kind of realize what you're thinking" (2007, Lisa's member-check).
Spring 2007 readings from Dr. Ryan's course	n=6	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Mary, Kate	Course readings "influenced my thinking a lot. I really liked the Jane Katch books." (2007, Jane's member-check).
Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy	n=6	Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	"[With] the practicum at Stowe just being able to see the actual structure of the classroom" was an influence (2007, Rose's member-check).
Research-related experiences	n=2	Mary, Kate	"If anything the fact that I got to talk about my education viewpoints one on one with someone was more valuable to me than the actual seminar class. Granted, the seminar shaped some of my views, but I enjoyed being able to talk it out without 15 [sic] other students commenting on it for once" (2007, Mary's member-check).
Other Hawkins' practicum course	n=1	Jane	"[Other practicum courses were an influence, but] I didn't spend as much time in them. I wasn't as familiar or comfortable with the teacher or the students" (2007, Jane's member-check).

As demonstrated in Table 1, the preservice teachers believed that both everyday and classroom experiences had influenced their beliefs about play. In terms of everyday

experiences, the preservice teachers described their own childhood experiences, previous experiences assisting in early childhood classrooms, informal experiences interacting with children (e.g. siblings, cousins, and neighbors), and/or paid experiences (e.g. babysitting and tutoring) as influencing their beliefs about play. With regard to classroom experiences, they described discussions and/or readings from Dr. Ryan's course, their field placement at Stowe Academy, research-related experiences (e.g. the interview), and/or other Hawkins' practicum courses as influencing their beliefs about play. Even though the preservice teachers suggested that both types of experiences had influenced their beliefs about play, they seemed to cite a broader range of everyday experiences than classroom experiences. This may have been due to the fact that Dr. Ryan's course was the first class explicitly addressing play taken by each of the preservice teachers. Although one preservice teacher, Jane, cited other practicum courses as influencing her beliefs about play, she indicated that this coursework had focused on childhood development and not on play.

In coding their experiences, I made a deliberate decision not only to include the university-based portions of Dr. Ryan's course as a *classroom experience*, but (also) the preservice teachers' field-based experience at Stowe, their research-related experiences and other Hawkins' practicum courses. Even though these experiences occurred outside of a formal instructional setting, during each of these experiences explicit connections were made between concepts (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). For instance, Dr. Ryan made explicit connections between the university-based coursework and the preservice teachers' field-based experiences. And, during their research-related experiences, namely the interview and member-checking portions of the study, I asked the preservice teachers to make explicit connections among their beliefs about play in a manner unlikely to occur in an "everyday" setting. In contrast, I chose to categorize the preservice teachers' previous experiences working in early childhood classrooms before college as *everyday experiences*. Unlike their experience at Stowe Academy in which Dr. Ryan made explicit connections between the university-based coursework and their field-based experiences, the preservice teachers' experiences prior to college did not seem to include this explicit

form of instruction. For instance, contrasting her field placement at Stowe Academy with her previous high school experience in an early childhood classroom, Mary noted:

I was a high school senior and now I'm a sophomore. When I was a high school senior I wanted to be a teacher and I got all of that experience, but I didn't have all of the reading and the teaching about it (2007, Mary's member-check).

In the next section, I discuss how the everyday and classroom experiences cited by the preservice teachers seemed to shape their beliefs about play.

### ***How Experiences Shaped the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play***

Vygotsky (1986) suggested that concepts developed from everyday experiences and those developed from classroom experiences "...are related to and constantly influence each other" (p. 157). In other words, everyday and classroom experiences have a symbiotic relationship. In line with Vygotsky's proposition, the preservice teachers seemed to use their incoming beliefs about play which had developed from their everyday experiences to evaluate their classroom experiences. And, they seemed to use their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs about play. In the following sections, each will be discussed in turn.

#### **Using incoming beliefs about play to evaluate classroom experiences.**

All seven preservice teachers described everyday experiences, such as their own early childhood experiences, previous experiences assisting in early childhood classrooms, informal experiences interacting with children (e.g. siblings, cousins, and neighbors), and/or paid experiences (e.g. babysitting and tutoring) as influencing their beliefs about play. The preservice teachers seemed to use beliefs developed from these experiences to evaluate their classroom experiences, such as course readings and discussions and their field placements at Stowe Academy. In this section, I use data collected from two of the preservice teachers, Joan and Mary, to illustrate how the preservice teachers seemed to use their incoming beliefs to evaluate their classroom experiences. Specifically, I describe how Joan's and Mary's childhood experiences seemed to lead to diverging beliefs about the role of play in the early childhood



classroom. And, I describe how Joan and Mary used their incoming beliefs to evaluate and to come to different conclusions about two classroom experiences, namely a course reading on play, Dorrell (2004), and their respective placements at Stowe Academy.

Joan and Mary both believed that their childhood experiences had influenced their beliefs about play. For instance, describing the influence of this everyday experience on her beliefs, Joan stated:

[With] my own early childhood experiences, I guess when I look at the preschoolers that I'm working with now, and I look at my own preschool experience I feel sad for these kids because I think they are losing out on part of their childhood. In preschool when you are able to just be free and do whatever, you can meet your best friends, you're just a kid and you're three and you're four. You're just a kid and you don't have the stresses of school or the stresses of academic expectations or anything like that. I think that I turned out just fine and I didn't go to an academic based preschool. I went to, it was basically a daycare center and we goofed around all day and we are all fine (2007, Joan's member-check).

Based on her childhood experience, Joan seemed to believe that young children needed to have enjoyable stress-free environments with a limited focus on academics. In line with her childhood experience, Joan described play as "fun and spontaneous" (2007, Joan's interview) and believed that it encouraged social-emotional development, stating that during play:

They're [children are] learning, they're developing their social skills. [They're] learning how to work together with others, figuring out what we're going to do and why we're going to do it and joining in and learning to play in groups and being including of others (2007, Joan's Interview).

In addition, throughout the semester Joan emphasized the need for play in the early childhood classroom, suggesting that in her future early childhood classroom students would be "allowed and highly encouraged to play" (2007, Joan's IIECE). In this fashion, Joan's beliefs about play seemed to reflect her childhood experiences.

Like Joan, Mary also believed that her childhood experiences had influenced her beliefs about play. However, in contrast to Joan's experience which deemphasized academics, Mary's childhood experience seemed to deemphasize social-emotional development. Describing the influence of her childhood experiences on her beliefs, Mary stated:

I do reflect a lot on my experience, how I was taught. Because a lot of times I listen to some of the stuff where it's kind of like hokey stuff where they're like "we have to develop the child socially and emotionally and stuff" and "if you don't do this, and this, and this" and sometimes I'm like, "you know I didn't have any of that stuff" (2007, Mary's member-check).

Based on her childhood experience, Mary seemed to deemphasize the importance of social-emotional development, a form of development that she associated with play. For instance, Mary described "sharing/playing nicely" (2007, Mary's IIECE) as one of the purposes of play. Although Mary suggested that she would include play in her future early childhood classroom, once stating "of course I will allow/encourage my students to play in my classroom" (2007, Mary's IIECE), she seemed to minimize its role in the curriculum. She evidenced this belief by characterizing play activities as occurring in a "house setting" (2007, Mary's interview) and by suggesting that young children should "be more prepared academically wise than personally wise" (2007, Mary's interview).

Using prior experiences to formulate one's beliefs is a practice commonly engaged in by preservice teachers (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Levin & He, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). For instance, Weinstein (1989) found that the 113 preservice teachers surveyed in her study demonstrated "self-serving biases, perceiving as important for teaching those attributes they themselves possess" (p. 53). Like the preservice teachers in Weinstein's study, the preservice teachers in this study seemed to base their beliefs about play in part on their everyday experiences, such as their childhood. Jacobs and Eskridge (1999) have suggested that these personal experiences "can be blurred by time or distorted by other events and misconceptions" and

can lead people to overgeneralize from their beliefs (p. 64). Thus, not only can prior experiences become hazy over time, relying on those experiences suggest a direct correlation between a particular experience and a later outcome. For instance, implicit in Joan's argument that she "turned out just fine" even though she did not attend "an academic based preschool" (2007, Joan's member-check) and Mary's argument that social-emotional development is "hokey" because she "didn't have any of that stuff" (2007, Mary's member-check), is the assumption that they turned out well because of their childhood experiences without regard for how the intervening years between preschool and college had influenced their current success. Thus, while it is not atypical for preservice teachers to base their incoming beliefs on everyday experiences, in doing so they may be basing their current beliefs about play on vague memories and using the uncertain connection between those experiences and their outcomes as a basis for their decisions about play.

Beyond using their experiences to formulate their beliefs, Joan and Mary seemed to use these incoming beliefs to evaluate their classroom experiences, such as their course readings and their placement at Stowe Academy. For instance, based on their incoming beliefs about the role of play in the early childhood classroom, Joan and Mary seemed to come to different conclusions about a course reading, Dorrell (2004), which described the importance of classroom play and of specific learning centers, such as a block center, a language arts center, a creativity and art center, a dramatic play center, a math and manipulative center, and a science and sensorial center. Mary and Joan demonstrated their different impressions of this article during a class discussion on it:

*Mary asked "If a classroom were to incorporate all of these things [all of the activities listed by Dorrell]...isn't there a danger of clutter?" She stated that in her placement at Stowe there are "only 12" children in the classroom, but "what if there were 20, as a child you might feel overwhelmed." In addition, Mary stated that there is a "value to open space."*

*In response, Dr. Ryan stated that "I agree aesthetics matters" and "being in a portable really creates some challenges." Dr. Ryan then asked the class, "What takes up the majority of space in your classrooms?"*

*Joan responded “desks.”*

*Then, Dr. Ryan asked “Is that true for you Mary?”*

*Mary indicated that the majority of space in her placement was used for places to sit. Dr. Ryan then asked about the type of work children do at the tables.*

*Joan stated “academic.”*

*And, Mary stated “anything and everything I’m sure.”*

*Dr. Ryan stated that classroom “materials reflect what is valuable and important” and if you “remove tables and create centers it might be possible to avoid clutter.”*

*Rose followed-up by stating that “one center could be one table in the classroom.”*

*Then, Mary stated “having so much stuff around when it is time to learn addition and subtraction, the kids are going to be distracted because the manipulatives are in competition” with the direct teaching.*

*Dr. Ryan indicated that how items are placed in a classroom can affect the learning environment.*

*In response, a student described how in her placement the children face away from the manipulatives during direct teaching so that they can focus on the teacher.*

*Next, Joan stated that in her classroom there was a small play area that only four children could play in at one time. She stated, “We have preschoolers. And, there is much more room for pen and paper activities than for play.” She continued by stating that the classroom should “have more room for play especially for three and four year olds”...*

*[Later in the conversation] Dr. Ryan asked the 12 students present to indicate which centers they had seen in their current placements. Ten of the students indicated that they had seen a language arts center, seven of the students indicated that they had seen a math center, two of the students indicated they had seen an art center, two of the students indicated that they had seen a dramatic*

*play center, one student thought she had seen a block center, and none of the students had seen a science center.*

*In response, Joan stated "...we are dealing with the youngest ones who are more prone to play," and again noted that her field placement only had one play center.*

*Lisa, who was placed in the same prekindergarten classroom as Joan, responded that "it's hard to know what they have" since they are there for a small portion of the day.*

*Then, Dr. Ryan suggested that they might want to ask their mentors what is available during center time.*

*Next, Joan stated that because the pre-kindergarteners don't have P.E. the teachers "take time out of the day to play with them in the morning," but they only have one center in which they can play.*

*Dr. Ryan asked the preservice teachers what sense they made of so few of them raising their hands when she asked which centers they had in their placements.*

*One of the students suggested that in order to have all of the items listed by Dorrell a teacher would need "the monetary means to get all of these things." And, she noted that if you are "imagining the perfect classroom, schools especially public schools aren't funded well." She continued by stating that the article presented a "good ideal," however, not all teachers will have the "space and funding. Teachers are doing all they can" but they don't have enough resources for the ideal.*

*Then, Joan responded, "I think of my kindergarten experience" and then she proceeded to describe how in her own childhood kindergarten classroom the room had been divided into two sections with one for "reading" and the other for "a kitchen area, blocks, all the things they're talking about [referring to the Dorrell reading]." She continued by stating that "There was social interaction," and "we got time to develop ourselves. I knew what I liked. I think if that's taken away...I couldn't imagine being at a desk all day"...*

*Then, a student suggested that she felt like they had a number of the items on the list, just not to the same extent. And then she suggested that “maybe we don’t see it.”*

*Mary followed-up by stating that, “I think our teachers do a good job incorporating as much as they can.” Referring to the list, she noted that in her classroom they did not have “stamps,” but she didn’t believe it would be “hugely detrimental” to the children (Narrative 2/20/2007).*

Joan’s and Mary’s responses to the text seemed to be related to beliefs developed from their childhood experiences. In line with her own play-based early childhood education, Joan seemed to support Dorrell’s (2004) proposition that diverse play centers should be included in the classroom. As she noted, growing up she had “all the things” that Dorrell (2004) suggested should be included in an early childhood classroom.

In contrast, Mary, whose early childhood education focused on academics, seemed to raise concerns about the course reading. Not only did the activities described in the article seem extraneous, she also seemed to believe that they could interfere with children’s academic learning, such as learning “addition and subtraction,” an issue she addressed during our interview. Specifically, drawing on the Dorrell (2004) article, Mary described why she believed academics should be emphasized over play in the early childhood classroom. She stated:

We read this article [Dorrell (2004)], and it had this huge list of the ultimate centers. And, the centers that are the best of the best and this is what centers have to have. And, we were thinking about financially how do you fund all of it? Because a lot of it is as much as you can possibly put, anything conceivable like bubbles and Play-Doh and everything. And so a lot of it is that you’re not going to be able to have everything. Either you’re going to have area constraints or you’re going to have budget constraints. And so I guess you have to pick and choose and decide what’s the most important. And so for me it would be centers, and I guess calendar time and flashcards...I understand that they want to socially and emotionally and morally and personally develop these kids, but likewise I guess I’m a little old fashioned. I really think the purpose of school is to get an

education. A lot of times school is seen as you know... there are places where kids go to school, they sit down for a large chunk of the day and they just learn. And so I'd want to focus on the education part of school. So, in my room I'd probably try to fill all those needs first and then I guess the whole personal development, I think that will come anyway if I have good centers (2007, Mary's interview).

Here again Mary's belief that play activities should be limited in favor of academic activities seemed to reflect her own childhood experience. Although Mary described her beliefs as "old fashioned," they seemed to represent a 21<sup>st</sup> century view of early childhood education. Specifically, historically early childhood has emphasized social-emotional development over academics (Weber, 1984). Perhaps Mary viewed her beliefs as old-fashioned because she had developed them during her childhood; a period of time (i.e. late 1980's and early 1990's) that coincided with a shift in early childhood education from a focus on social-emotional development towards an "earlier is better" (Elkind, 1990, p. 4) model which marginalized the use of play in early childhood classrooms and encouraged a focus on academic content.

In addition to demonstrating how their divergent childhood experiences may have led to different responses to a particular text, the class discussion also highlighted how their childhood experiences may have influenced their impressions of their field placements at Stowe Academy. Like their responses to the course reading, Joan who was placed in a prekindergarten classroom and Mary who was placed in a kindergarten classroom seemed to have different impressions of their placements at Stowe Academy. Specifically, during the class discussion Joan expressed concerns about the limited amount of play that she had observed in her placement, stating three times that the classroom included only one play center. In contrast, Mary, whose placement also included limited amounts of play, did not express concerns about these limitations. Instead, she suggested that the teachers were "incorporating as much as they can" and that the absence of some of the play activities suggested by Dorrell (2004) would not be "hugely detrimental" for the children.

Both Joan and Mary expanded on their divergent perspectives of their placements during our interview. For instance, describing her impression of her prekindergarten placement, Joan and I had the following exchange:

**Joan:** I expected to see [at Stowe] what we had in preschool, just a lot of playing, a lot of fun, allowing a child to be three and four years old... [And,] I think it's too much academics. I think it's way too much. I think it's sad, I think they're losing part of their childhood. There is a ton more academics than I thought there would be and a lot less play than I thought there would be.

**Me:** How do you feel about that?

**Joan:** It upsets me, it upsets me a lot.

**Me:** Can you talk to me a little about that?

**Joan:** I think that they're having their childhood taken away from them. I think of four year olds still as like babies. They shouldn't have to deal with the stress of school. I remember the first day [at Stowe] when I walked in one little girl, who I am actually doing my child study on now, was just crying. And she cried for like 45 minutes and I was like "What's wrong with her?" and she [the teacher] was like "We're ignoring her." And, this child is still four years old...you're ignoring a little girl who's crying, she's upset. And, I asked her "Why do you think she's upset?" And, she said, "Oh, she doesn't like learning. Last semester when we were doing more play and getting used to being in school, she was fine. But, now we're into academics." And, I was like she's just not ready to be here. She's just not ready to be in this academic environment. And, it sucks that we're putting these kids in this early because they need to be ahead, you know, because if they're not in preschool, they're not going to get into the Ivy League. They're thrusting a child into a situation that they're just not ready for, and also it's just so long. When I was in kindergarten, we did half day. I was there I think from 8:00 until 11:30; these kids are there from 8:00 to 2:50 or something like. That is a long day for a four year old. At four years old, I was still taking naps. These kids have to be awake and alert that whole time, and learn. It's too much stress. It's too much for a little kid.



**Me:** If they redesigned the classroom that you are in to incorporate less academics and more play would you feel more comfortable with them being there?

**Joan:** Yeah. When I was in pre-k they were snobs. We never did any academics. I didn't start academics until I was in kindergarten. We just played; we were three and four year olds goofing off. We were babies. We had nap time, not everybody did it, but it was there. And, I think that it made being there longer okay. You know you're not thrusting all of this information into a four year old's head. They have to try to memorize and the stress of not getting it right. I mean in helping these kids in my practicum class writing their ABCs, and with every letter they say "it's too hard, it's too hard." And, I'm like "Yeah, because you're not ready to learn this stuff, like you're not ready to learn to write. You're not ready to do everything that they want you to do." They're just not ready (2007, Joan's interview).

Unlike her own positive schooling experience which had included play and focused on social-emotional growth and development, the prekindergarten children in Joan's placement seemed frustrated by the emphasis placed on academics. Thus, using beliefs derived from her everyday experiences, Joan came to the conclusion that her prekindergarten field placement focused too heavily on academics and not enough on play.

While Joan expressed concerns about the limited amount of play she had observed in her field placement, Mary did not. Although Mary did not cite her own early childhood experience when describing her impressions of her field placement at Stowe, the views she expressed seemed in line with those experiences. Specifically, while she noticed that limited play occurred in her field placement, she did not seem to view it as a problem. Specifically, of the fifteen activities that she categorized as play during our interview—*art time (outside of class), outdoor play, P.E., traditional board games, water and sand table, Play-Doh, dress-up clothes, tag, kickball, pretending to be a superhero, pretending to be a character from a rated R movie, and participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another*— she indicated that she had observed only one of these activities during her field visits, namely P.E. And, of the three activities she

categorized as middle—*centers, jigsaw puzzles, and painting*—which she believed to be play under certain conditions and not play under other conditions, Mary indicated that she had only observed centers during her field visits. However, unlike Joan, Mary did not raise concerns about the limited amount of play in her field placement. Instead, when I asked Mary about her impressions of her kindergarten placement, she focused on the classroom context, namely the size of the classroom itself stating, “The biggest impression I have is that I hate their classroom, it’s so tiny” (2007, Mary’s interview). Perhaps because her childhood experience led her to believe that early childhood education should focus on academics, Mary did not believe the limited amount of play she had observed needed to be addressed. Thus, based on beliefs developed from their divergent childhood experiences, Joan and Mary seemed to come to different conclusions about their placements at Stowe.

The preservice teachers’ use of everyday experiences, such as their childhood experiences, to make sense of their classroom experiences, such as their field placement and course readings, parallels similar findings that suggest preservice teachers’ incoming beliefs influence what and how they learn in teacher preparation (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Weinstein, 1998, 1989; Wideen et al., 1998). For instance, Hollingsworth’s (1989) longitudinal qualitative study of 14 preservice teachers enrolled in a fifth year educational program suggested that preservice teachers’ beliefs acted “...as filters for processing program content and making sense of classroom contexts” (p. 168). Specifically, she found that the preservice teachers understanding of constructivist learning, the learning approach emphasized in their teacher education program, seemed related to their prior experiences with and incoming beliefs about teaching and learning. Thus, like preservice teachers generally, the preservice teachers in this study did not enter Dr. Ryan’s course as blank slates, but rather with beliefs derived from prior experiences (Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992), and they used these beliefs to make sense of the new experiences that they encountered during the semester.

### **Using classroom experiences to alter and/or add to incoming beliefs about play.**

In addition to using beliefs derived from their everyday experiences to make sense of their classroom experiences, the preservice teachers seemed to use their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs. Specifically, all of the preservice teachers appeared to incorporate ideas from their classroom experiences into their existing beliefs about play, and some of the preservice teachers also seemed to alter certain incoming beliefs about play based on their classroom experiences. In terms of the latter, I only detected changes in three of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play based on their classroom experiences. Other preservice teachers may have altered their incoming beliefs based on their classroom experiences; however, because my research design did not include a deliberate examination of changes in beliefs, the only evidence indicating that the preservice teachers had altered their beliefs came from the preservice teachers themselves. Thus, during our member check, these three preservice teachers gave explicit descriptions of how their classroom experiences had altered their incoming beliefs. In the remainder of this section, I demonstrate how the preservice teachers altered and added to their incoming beliefs about play by providing a detailed description of how one preservice teacher, Kate, engaged in both practices.

Kate was one of three preservice teachers who described how classroom experiences had altered her incoming beliefs about play, including how she defined play and how she viewed violent play. First, Kate believed that participating in the study had led her to a new understanding of how she defined play. Appendix C illustrates the activities that Kate identified as play, middle, and not play. During our interview, Kate used multiple attributes to describe the activities that she had categorized as play including that it is child-determined, creative/imaginative, less-serious, physically active, less-academic and it involves pretend and singing. During her member-checking session, however, Kate indicated that as she read her transcript she realized that she could identify play activities but not characterize play more generally. Describing the influence of the study on her beliefs, we had the following exchange:

*Kate:* ...having to verbalize my own opinions really makes me second guess myself. When I looked at my transcript and actually had to differentiate between

what was play and what wasn't play, and I couldn't figure out why I couldn't decide. And, I think that that's just been the biggest thing.

*Me:* ...what do you think was hard about the deciding? As you were reading over your transcript and figuring out what was play and what was not play could you put your finger on what the issue was?

*Kate:* I think defending it. It wasn't necessarily picking it out, but when you asked why. I was like "Well, I don't know." That's been the hardest part because it's been sort of exciting to be part of this process because you hear about college studies all the time, and I read them all the time and write them for papers and participating is really cool. But, at the same time I feel pressure to know what I'm talking about and to be able to defend that. And, so, even though I feel like that [an individual activity from the list] is play, I feel like that [an individual activity from the list] is not play. As far as explaining my reasoning, I couldn't really.

Through participating in the study, Kate realized that she felt comfortable identifying play activities, but she had troubling explaining why they were play. Instead of drawing on a general framework to define play, Kate identified play activities on a case by case basis. Thus, Kate may have begun the study believing that she could define play; however, the combination of reading her interview transcript and the internal pressure that she felt to be knowledgeable about play caused her to question how she had originally described play and play activities to me and in so doing led her to a new understanding of her beliefs about what constitutes play.

Kate's indication that the interview influenced her beliefs suggests that research-related experiences may alter preservice teachers' incoming beliefs about play. While evidence exists that university and field-based experience may influence some preservice teachers' beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001), none of these studies explore whether or how participating in the study itself shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs. In the closest related finding, Scott's (2005) mixed-methods study of the experiences that influenced preservice teachers' approaches to primary mathematics

instruction found that discussions with family and friends who worked in education had shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs. Scott, however, did not indicate if the interviews that she conducted with the preservice teachers had any influence on their beliefs.

Although these studies have not examined how research-related experiences influence preservice teachers' beliefs, research on inservice teachers' beliefs about play has. Specifically, through their interpretive study of nine early childhood education teachers' theories of and practices with play, Bennett et al. (1997) found that the process of discussing their beliefs about play, watching videotapes of their play practice, and discussing those videotapes led to changes in the teachers' beliefs about play. For instance, this process led one of the teachers, Eve, to suggest that "her theories about play were not being realized in practice" (p. 101). Thus, participating in a study on beliefs about play may alter those beliefs.

In a second instance of classroom experiences altering her beliefs about play, Kate described how course readings, class discussions, and her placement in a kindergarten classroom at Stowe Academy had altered her beliefs about the inclusion of violent play activities in the classroom. During our interview early in the semester, Kate indicated that she would exclude from her future classroom the following play activities, *pretending to be a character from a violent R-rated movie* and *participating in cops and robbers where participants pretend to shoot one another*. Explaining why, she stated:

Pretending to be a character from a violent R-rated movie, that's pretty obvious, I would want to keep all sense of violence or as much as I could outside of the classroom. Same for participating in cops and robbers where participants pretend to shoot one another (2007, Kate's interview).

Equating violent play with violence, Kate believed that she would exclude these activities from her own early childhood classroom.

During the semester, the preservice teachers read and discussed Katch (2001), a book in which the author, a teacher researcher, grappled with whether and how to include violent play in her own early childhood classroom. Through observations, discussions, and reflections, Katch came to distinguish between violent play and violent behavior and found that through violent play children may "learn to articulate their feelings about their

play, listen to each other and make rules that will help them treat each other with empathy and respect” (p. 125). These classroom experiences seemed to alter Kate’s beliefs about play. Specifically, during our member-checking session at the end of the semester, Kate seemed open to including in her future classroom the two activities she originally wanted to exclude, namely *pretending to be a character from a violent R-rated movie* and *participating in cops and robbers where participants pretend to shoot one another*. She stated:

**Kate:** I might reconsider participating in cops and robbers... [It] may not particularly be ideal but I definitely have a different view on it now. Especially mostly through Dr. Ryan’s class and the way we have talked about violence and the dictation and dramatization project that we’ve been working on. We’ve come across a little bit of violence but it’s usually in such good humor with the students. It’s usually something funny and silly and lighthearted, and it’s not this vice. It doesn’t seem as wrong. But, when I read that the first time, I thought “Why would you want your students to be pretending to shoot each other in the classroom?”

**Me:** What about the other one that dealt with violence, pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie, how would you feel about that?

**Kate:** I guess it depends on the character and what the student is actually enacting. But, I would say that I’m more opened to consider that now. Now, that we have gone through all of that (2007, Kate’s member-check).

Based on her classroom experiences, over the course of the semester, Kate seemed to alter her beliefs about the extent to which these activities should be included in the classroom. She seemed to move away from wanting to exclude them, towards a willingness to include them. Although she did not believe these activities were ideal, her classroom experiences led her to be more open to their inclusion.

Thus, for three of the preservice teachers, their classroom experiences, such as course readings, course discussions, field placement experiences and/or research-related experiences, over the course of the semester seemed to influence their beliefs about play by altering their incoming perceptions of it. These findings align with studies that university coursework and/or field placements may lead some preservice teachers to alter

their incoming beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001). For instance, Isikoglu's (2008) mixed method study of whether and how 78 preservice teachers' beliefs about constructivism changed after participating in a course intervention specifically designed to promote constructivist teaching found a significant change in the preservice teachers' beliefs over the course of the semester. Similarly, in this study, three of the preservice teachers suggested that from the beginning of the semester during our interview to the end of the semester during our member-checking session a shift occurred in their beliefs about play based on their classroom experiences.

Although only three of the preservice teachers described how classroom experiences had altered their incoming beliefs about play, all seven preservice teachers seemed to incorporate ideas from their classroom experiences into their beliefs. The incorporation by Kate of ideas presented during the course's oral dictation and dramatization project into her beliefs about play provide a case in point. Prior to participating in this project, Kate described *dictating a story to a teacher and acting it out as a class* as middle because she believed that it incorporated both the qualities of play and not play. She stated that, "The first part of the activity would definitely be more instructional. And, I thought the second part would be more open to what the students want, rather than what's expected of them" (2007, Kate's interview). In addition, she described the pretend portion of the activity as play. She stated, "All pretending I decided was play, even drama and where it's acting out in a certain way—as in dictating a story to the teacher and acting it out" (2007, Kate's interview). Although this activity was not exclusively play, Kate seemed to believe it had several characteristics of play. Furthermore, when asked if she would incorporate this activity into her future classroom, she indicated that she would include it. Thus, prior to engaging in the project, Kate seemed to have formed general beliefs about oral dictation and dramatization.

Participating in the oral dictation and dramatization project seemed to provide Kate with concrete experiences to draw upon to explain in greater detail the activity and its value to young children. Drawing on both the field-based and university-based

portions of the project, Kate wrote in her final course paper about their influence on her beliefs:

*We began our dictation dramatization project, and it had been one of the most fun and most exciting things I have done this semester. We have read many things in class that demonstrated how beneficial the project could be for students. Going into the project, I felt prepared to lead the lesson and knowledgeable on what we were going to be doing. We learned the process by which to take dictation, what to expect to hear, and how to dramatize in a way that was fair to all the students. Actually getting the experience to take Michael [her child study student] aside and catch a glimpse of his creativity that was not inhibited by the presence of the teacher or classmates was really exciting. He told me a story of the Gingerbread man, who was eaten by an alligator while he was crossing a river. Also as we learned, Michael paid very close attention to my writing. If I began to write when he was not speaking, he stopped me and asked me why I was writing. He watched as I wrote each word, and I could tell he was making an attempt to read the words aloud. I was impressed with his precision and his interest in reading and writing.*

*During dramatization, Michael was very involved and did not need to be reminded to “act” as some of the other students did. He followed along quickly with the story, and his actions were animated and enthusiastic. He was eager to perform and excited about his story being read aloud, especially at the end when everyone clapped and laughed (2007, Kate’s final paper).*

For Kate, the university-based portion of the course had provided a model for her to use when conducting the lesson in her classroom. And, through her field-placement, she witnessed first hand the benefits that she had read about in her course readings and had discussed in class. She emphasized her belief in the benefit of this activity during our final discussion, describing the activity she stated:

For obvious reasons, I have loved this activity. And, even afterwards the [mentor] teacher just said, “This has gone so well, I’ve never seen the students this animated.” And, I feel like it just brought the best out of them and they were so



excited and so interested and I think it just teaches them a lot about confidence and going back to the whole idea of literacy. My student watched as I wrote every word, and if I was writing when he wasn't talking, he got sort of suspicious and "What are you saying?" So, they were really paying attention. I think paying closer attention than they would if the teacher was writing on the board because it was their story, their words (2007, Kate's member-check).

After reading about, discussing, and implementing oral dictation and dramatization, Kate seemed to use the ideas presented during the oral dictation and dramatization unit to describe the activity and its value to young children.

Like Kate, the other preservice teachers seemed to incorporate ideas from their field placements, course readings and/or class discussions into their beliefs about play. For instance, describing how they would incorporate play into a hypothetical kindergarten schedule (see Appendix D), Jane and Lisa each referenced a course reading, Johnson et al. (1999), which addressed how teachers can facilitate play in the classroom. In one section, *Providing Adequate Time for Play*, the authors presented research suggesting that play periods should last a minimum of 30 minutes. In addition to completing the reading, Dr. Ryan discussed the reading in general, and addressed this issue in particular during one class session (Narrative 3/08/2007).

Jane and Lisa both seemed to incorporate the ideas presented in the text and discussed in class into their beliefs about play. For instance, in describing how she would incorporate play into a kindergarten schedule, Jane stated:

...I might even try to allow for 20 minutes or 30 minutes of play time right before lunch...Or, maybe even, because we talked about how having long periods of play is beneficial and I agree with that. So, perhaps even being able to switch out something every couple of days. Like science and social studies could go together, and then one of those periods could be creative play (2007, Jane's member-check).

Similarly, Lisa stated that she would include:

...maybe 45 minutes would be enough, I'm not quite sure how long...I know we talked about it in class, like how long good dramatic play takes, so I'd say maybe

45 minutes...And maybe even do a bigger chunk every other day or something. Do an hour every other day instead of a shorter time every day (2007, Lisa's member-check).

In both instances, Jane and Lisa seemed to incorporate an idea from the reading and related class discussion, namely the value of extended uninterrupted play periods, into determining how to include play in the daily schedule.

In these instances, the preservice teachers seemed to add to instead of alter their existing beliefs about play. Explaining this phenomenon Patrick & Pintrich (2001), in their review of literature, noted that preservice teachers have been found “to adopt new beliefs without giving up their previous conceptions” (p. 123), an assertion supported by the findings of Joram and Gabriele's (1998) mixed-methods study which examined the effects of an educational psychology course on preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching. Specifically, 40% of their 53 participants reported that “their views of learning had changed in that they had added new information to their existing repertoire” (Joram & Gabriele, 1998, p. 184). As Isikoglu (2008) noted, in this regard, the preservice teachers' classroom experiences helped them to better articulate their incoming beliefs by giving them concrete experiences to draw upon when discussing those beliefs.

### ***Summary: Everyday and Classroom Experiences***

In this section, I illustrated the experiences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and how these experiences worked together to inform their beliefs. Specifically, the preservice teachers (a) used their incoming beliefs about play developed from their everyday experiences to evaluate their classroom experiences, and (b) used their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs about play. Although experience seemed to influence the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, experience alone did not shape their beliefs. Instead, three other influences described by Nespor (1987)—affective and evaluative loading, alternativity, and existential presumption—also seemed to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. In the next section, I discuss these influences.

## **Beyond Experience: Affective and Evaluative Loading, Alternativity, and Existential Presumption**

While Vygotsky's (1986) work offered a refined notion of experience by delineating between everyday and classroom experiences, Nespor's (1987) work extended Vygotsky's (1986) by looking beyond experience to include three other influences that also shape beliefs, namely *affective and evaluative loading*, *alternativity* and *existential presumption*. Specifically, Nespor suggested that in addition to experience, which he referred to as *episodic storage*, teachers use their feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loading), ideals (i.e. alternativity) and universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption) when formulating their beliefs. Like Vygotsky (1986), who suggested a symbiotic relationship between the two types of experiences that influence thinking, Nespor (1987) suggested a similar relationship among the four influences that he described as shaping beliefs. First, he suggested that the affective and evaluative components of beliefs affect which experiences have the greatest influence on a person's beliefs. Second, he suggested that people draw upon all four influences when defining and framing tasks.

In line with Nespor (1987), the preservice teachers' beliefs about play seemed to be shaped by their feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loading), ideals (i.e. alternativity) and universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption). In addition, the preservice teachers seemed to use these three influences along with their experiences (i.e. episodic storage) to facilitate their memory processes and to define their beliefs about play. After providing an overview of the three influences, I describe how they, along with the preservice teachers' experiences, appeared to shape their beliefs about play.

### ***Overview of Influences***

All seven preservice teachers demonstrated that their feelings, ideals and universal assumptions had shaped their beliefs about play. However, the extent to which they themselves recognized these features as influences on their beliefs varied. First, all seven preservice teachers suggested that feelings, what they liked and disliked, had shaped their beliefs about play. Nespor suggested that feelings, which he referred to as

*affective and evaluative loading*, represented the emotive component of a teacher's beliefs. For instance, Lisa indicated that, "...whether I think I'll like it or I don't definitely influences [my beliefs about play]" (2007, Lisa's member check). Her description of why she would include an art center, tag, and kickball in her classroom demonstrated how her personal preferences had influenced her beliefs. She stated:

Art center that's a big one. I would really like the idea of an art center. I mean it doesn't have to be too involved just some form of art... I really want them to do physical stuff too, so some of the activities like tag, kickball, I think that that is important (2007, Lisa's interview).

Thus, Lisa's desire to include these activities in her classroom seemed to be based on her personal preferences for them.

Similarly, Jane suggested that her personal preferences had influenced her beliefs because they "...often end up aligning with what works and what doesn't in my experiences. And, it's my choice. Basically, it's my classroom, right? So, it is my personal preference for how to deal with things" (2007, Jane's member-check). Jane's description of why she would include dress-up clothes in her classroom demonstrated how her personal preferences influenced her beliefs about play. She stated, "I think it is really important for them to get into other roles and role-play" (2007, Jane's interview). Jane believed dress-up clothes should be included in the classroom because she felt that they were "important" for young children. Thus, as Lisa's and Jane's examples demonstrate, the preservice teachers' affinity for a particular aspect of play seemed to influence their beliefs about it.

Second, like feelings, all seven preservice teachers' beliefs about play seemed to be shaped by their idealized notions of it. Nespors suggested that ideals, which he referred to as *alternativity*, reflect a person's conception of an optimum situation (e.g. how a person would like a situation to be), versus the present reality of that situation. And, he suggested that conceptions of ideal situations are not necessarily based on a person's direct experience. The Utopian quality of *alternativity* may help to explain why only five of the seven preservice teachers suggested it had influenced their beliefs. Specifically, inherent in *alternativity* is an affective or evaluative component. In other words, to

describe a utopian situation, a person would have to suggest a scenario that she felt was best. Thus, some overlap may exist between alternativity and affective and evaluative loading and this may help to explain why not all of the preservice teachers cited it as an influence on their beliefs.

Although only a portion of the preservice teachers identified alternativity as an influence on their beliefs, all seven of the preservice teachers' beliefs seemed to be influenced by their ideal notions of play. For instance, Joan suggested that alternativity had shaped her thinking by stating, "I think that you are always wondering what should I do as a teacher? What can I do differently? What should I keep?" (2007, Joan's member-check). Joan's characterization of play as *positive* and her desire to exclude two activities that she believed were negative highlighted her idealized notions of play. Specifically, during our interview, Joan described *pretend* as one of the characteristics of play. Yet, she categorized two activities that involved pretend, *pretending to be a character from a violent rated-R movie* and *participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another*, as middle. When I asked her about her decision, she stated:

**Joan:** I think pretending is playing. A lot of it has to do with play, but they're not positive play. It's promoting something that's not necessarily good. It's not good for those kinds of kids [pre-kindergarteners and kindergarteners] because they shouldn't have been seeing an R-rated movie. But, I think that play also needs to be productive and this is not productive.

**Me:** When you say productive, can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by that?

**Joan:** Productive meaning, a positive outcome. I don't think that playing cops and robbers and shooting people produces anything positive (2007, Joan's interview).

Because these activities did not align with Joan's idealized notion of the types of play children should engage in, Joan decided that they were not exclusively play. Instead, they seemed to walk the line between being play because they involved pretend, and being not play because she did not perceive them to be positive. In addition, because Joan believed that these forms of play were not ideal, she indicated during our interview that she would exclude them from her future classroom.

Like Joan, Kate also suggested that alternativity, what she believed should happen in the early childhood classroom, had influenced her beliefs about play. Although she did not explain how it had influenced her beliefs, our discussion of the *water and sand table*, demonstrated the influence of alternativity on her beliefs. Specifically, during our interview, Kate categorized the *water and sand table* as play and suggested that she would include it in her future classroom. Later, however, when I asked Kate to describe the benefits of the water and sand table, she revealed that she had never seen one suggesting that her original categorization of this activity was based on her idealized notion of it. She stated:

I can't really think of that. I think that's one of the ones I keep coming across and don't really know what to do with it. I've never had one, I've never been in a classroom that had one, I've never talked to a teacher about having one. So, I don't really understand the benefits of the water/sand table other than maybe just fun and getting a little bit messy (2007, Kate's member-check).

Because Kate had never seen a water and sand table, she seemed to base her categorization of it as play and her desire to include it in the classroom on an ideal image of what she believed the water and sand table to be. Thus, as Joan's and Kate's examples demonstrate, the preservice teachers' idealized notion of play seemed to influence their beliefs.

Finally, although none of the preservice teachers described universal assumptions as shaping their beliefs about play, their beliefs seemed to be influenced by them. According to Nespor (1987), these universal assumptions, which he referred to as *existential presumption*, represent a situation or an idea that appears real or true regardless of whether or not it is. The absolute quality of existential presumption may help to explain why the preservice teachers did not describe it as an influence on their beliefs. Because truth is assumed in existential presumption, the preservice teachers may have been unaware of its influence on their beliefs. In addition, unlike the other influences, I did not specifically ask the preservice teachers if their beliefs were influenced by universal assumptions. Perhaps, if I had, they would have recognized it as an influence.

Each of the preservice teachers in this study made comments that suggested certain universal assumptions about play had shaped their beliefs. Rose's initial impression of the seven activities that all seven preservice teachers categorized as play—*Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*—provides a case in point. She stated:

**Rose:** Well, I guess I would say the reason that we all picked them is because the play are all very traditional ones...dress-up, tag, board games, superheroes.

**Me:** Traditional in what sense?

**Rose:** Common things for American children to do as play (2007, Rose's member-check).

Here, Rose seemed to believe that all of the preservice teachers categorized these activities as play because they represented a common set of play activities engaged in by American children. Thus, her belief seemed to be based on a universal assumption that all children use *Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, and kickball* regardless of whether or not they do.

Mary's response to a course reading, Paley (1992), which examined a classroom rule barring kindergarten children from excluding one another during play, provides a second example of how universal assumptions seemed to guide the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Describing her response to the reading, Mary stated:

[With Paley's book] I know we had an issue with being able to pick your own friends and about whether or not you should make other children play with other ones. I know we were really against the whole thing because we know resentment will come up if the teacher is always saying "you have to play" because if you make everybody play together, then children aren't allowed to express their own preferences. They can't develop the social skill of deciding who they want to have as friends. They feel as if they don't have control over their own lives; and granted because in a school setting we want everybody to get along. But, I think we were all against the fact that you should force people to play with each other (2007, Mary's member-check)

Based on her universal assumption that children would become resentful if they were required to include classmates in their play, Mary believed that Paley's rule was problematic. Her belief, however, contradicted the findings described by Paley herself. Although the kindergarteners in Paley's classroom seemed to go through an adjustment period after the rule was enacted, Paley found that the children not only excluded each other less, but they played with children that in the past they would have marginalized. Thus, according to Paley the rule was a success. Because, however, Mary assumed that children would resent the rule, she did not appear to accept these findings.

As evidenced by her use of the term "we," not only did Mary not accept Paley's findings she also seemed to believe that her fellow classmates held the same perspective as she. My field notes, however, suggested that some of the students in Dr. Ryan's course approved of Paley's approach:

*Dr. Ryan described a counterargument for Paley's rule offered by another teacher in the book who suggested that rejection is part of everyday life, so children need to get used to it. Lisa noted that "there are a lot of things that are part of life like death." Then Lisa went on to suggest that like exclusion you don't necessarily want children to experience those things.*

*Jane added that school should be a "haven" where children feel like they are "worth something" while another student suggested that including people is also part of life.*

*Rose stated that exclusion "doesn't have to be the norm." Instead through their classroom experience they could learn how to include others.*

*Piggybacking on this comment, another student added "if they feel accepted they can learn better." And, if they are not rejected when playing they might feel more comfortable sharing their ideas.*

*Finally, Joan noted that teachers need to keep children "physically and emotionally safe." As a teacher, Joan "wouldn't want them to deal with that in my classroom." Moreover, Joan suggested that "teachers are the keepers of children" and you should treat a child in class "like they're your own."*



*Dr. Ryan asked for a show of hands for who agreed with Paley's rule, several students raise their hands (although I was unable to get an exact count). Then, Dr. Ryan asked how many students disagreed with Paley's rule and 3 out of the 13 students present raised their hands. A number of students did not raise their hands either in support for or against the rule (Field notes, 3/01/2007).*

Although I was unable to get an exact count, my notes suggested that several of the preservice teachers seemed to agree with Paley's rule. It may be that when Mary used "we" she meant "some of us" or she may have had particular preservice teachers in the course in mind when she stated "we," such as those she knew shared her beliefs. However, her use of the term "we" may also suggest a universal assumption that, like Mary, everyone would view Paley's rule as problematic. Thus, as Rose's and Mary's examples demonstrate, the preservice teachers' universal assumptions about play seemed to influence their beliefs about it.

In this section, using Nespor (1987), I described the influences beyond experience that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, namely their feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loading), ideals (i.e. alternativity) and universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption). According to Nespor (1987), these three influences along with experience (i.e. episodic storage) work in concert by influencing which memories teachers use to formulate their beliefs and by influencing how they define tasks. In the next section, I explore how the influences cited by Nespor (1987) seemed to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

### ***How Influences Shaped the Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play***

Like Vygotsky (1986) who suggested that everyday and classroom experiences have a symbiotic relationship, Nespor (1987) suggested a teacher's experiences (i.e. episodic storage), feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loading), ideals (i.e. alternativity) and universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption) work in concert to shape beliefs. Specifically, Nespor suggested that teachers utilize these influences in two manners. First, he suggested that the affective and evaluative components of beliefs impact which experiences have the greatest influence on a teacher's beliefs. Second, he suggested that

teachers draw upon all four influences when defining and framing tasks. In the remainder of this section, I present data demonstrating how the preservice teachers' evidenced each.

**Facilitation of the memory process.**

Nespor (1987) suggested that the affective and evaluative component of beliefs impact which experiences have the greatest influence on teachers' beliefs. He stated:

The affective and emotional components of beliefs can influence the ways events and elements in memory are indexed and retrieved and how they are reconstructed during recall (p. 324).

Thus, a person's affective response to an event in his or her life shapes the extent to which that experience informs her beliefs. The preservice teachers evidenced this relationship, namely the connection between feelings and experience, by (a) indicating that certain influences had shaped their beliefs about play more than others and (b) not citing certain experiences as shaping their beliefs.

Each of the preservice teachers cited multiple experiences as shaping her beliefs about play, and each emphasized certain experiences over others. Table 2 demonstrates the experiences each preservice teacher cited as influencing her beliefs and how she ranked those experiences from most to least influential. In addition, experiences connected by the word "and" represent experiences an individual preservice teacher weighted equally.

Table 2: Experience Listed by Degree of Influence on Beliefs

Preservice Teacher	Experience listed in order of influence
<b>Lisa</b>	<i>Childhood experiences Informal experiences interacting with children <u>and</u> Spring 2007 course discussions Paid experiences working with children <u>and</u> Spring 2007 course readings</i>
<b>Jane</b>	<i>Previous experience assisting in an early childhood classroom before college Other Hawkins' practicum course Spring 2007 course readings Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy Spring 2007 course discussions</i>

<b>Sue</b>	<i>Childhood experiences Spring 2007 course readings Spring 2007 course discussions Informal experiences interacting with children Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy</i>
<b>Rose</b>	<i>Spring 2007 course readings <b>and</b> Spring 2007 course discussions Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy Childhood experiences</i>
<b>Joan</b>	<i>Previous experience assisting in an early childhood classroom before college Childhood experiences Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy Spring 2007 course discussions</i>
<b>Mary</b>	<i>Previous experience assisting in an early childhood classroom before college <b>and</b> Spring 2007 field-based experience at Stowe Academy Spring 2007 course discussions <b>and</b> Spring 2007 course discussions <b>and</b> Research-related experiences Childhood experiences</i>
<b>Kate</b>	<i>Research-related experiences Spring 2007 course discussions <b>and</b> Spring 2007 course readings <b>and</b> Spring 2007 field- based experience at Stowe Academy Previous experience assisting in an early childhood classroom before college Informal experiences interacting with children <b>and</b> Paid experiences working with children Childhood experiences</i>

As demonstrated by the table, although overlap existed among the experiences cited by the preservice teachers, the extent to which an individual experience influenced their beliefs varied. For instance, even though all seven preservice teachers believed that course discussions had influenced their beliefs about play, some cited it as a greater influence on their beliefs than others. As a case in point, Rose suggested that the course discussions had been one of the greatest influences on her beliefs about play. Describing the influence of course discussions and course readings, she stated “I think that definitely the course readings and discussions influenced [my beliefs about] play just by introducing new concepts and I liked them” (2007, Rose’s member-check). In contrast to Rose, even though Joan believed course discussions had influenced her beliefs about play, she believed that they were less influential than other experiences. Describing the influence of course discussions on her beliefs, she stated “I learned from other people. I’ve taken up different things, but it isn’t going to drive me to do things differently” (2007, Joan’s member-check). Thus, each of the preservice teachers seemed to believe that certain experiences had resonated with them more than others.

As another case in point, Jane emphasized the influence of her experience working as an assistant in a kindergarten classroom during high school over her

experience at Stowe Academy, and in contrasting those experiences she also demonstrated a greater affective response to the earlier event. Specifically, Jane described her work as an assistant in a kindergarten classroom during high school as the most influential experience on her beliefs. Describing this experience, she stated:

I was an assistant in a kindergarten classroom for my entire senior year [of high school] and that's what made me love early childhood teaching. And, the teacher I was with was amazing and the kids loved coming to school and it was just the kind of environment I would hope for in my classroom (2007, Jane's member-check).

For Jane, this experience exemplified a quality early childhood classroom that she hoped to someday replicate.

Similar to her high school placement, Jane also believed that her placement at Stowe had influenced her beliefs about play. However, she described it as having less influence on her beliefs than her high school experience. In addition, in contrast to her high school placement which she wanted to replicate, Jane believed her placement at Stowe demonstrated "...exactly how I want my classroom *not* to be" (2007, Jane's member-check). Describing her concerns about the limited amount of play she had observed at Stowe, we had the following exchange:

**Jane:** ...I expected to see more house stuff, and dress-up clothes, and toys and there weren't. And I'm not sure if it's just because Stowe doesn't have the monetary resources to buy these things, I'm sure that's part of it. But, also I think it's part of their philosophy about the Core Knowledge business which I'm not too keen on.

**Me:** Talk to me a little bit about that.

**Jane:** Well, it just seems that compared to a lot of the other schools I would have worked in they don't encourage play at Stowe and that everything is focused around the academic side.

**Me:** And, what does that end up looking like in your kindergarten class?

**Jane:** It's depressing, I don't see any toys. What was great for them was one day the teacher put out a thing of scrap paper. Just like scraps from something she'd

cut out and that was like the biggest joy and wonder to them that they could do whatever they wanted with the scraps of paper because there weren't any manipulatives that they could just play with themselves. Well first of all, there's not room for a house center or a kitchen center in the classroom. The only thing I saw was a puppet theater thing that was about 2 feet wide and 2 feet tall it was pretty depressing. I didn't notice any other kinds of play (2007, Jane's interview).

Given that Jane described her high school experience as an assistant in an early childhood classroom as the greatest influence on her beliefs about play, presumably Jane's statement that "compared to a lot of the other schools I would have worked in they don't encourage play at Stowe" referred in part to her high school experience. Accordingly, in terms of play, it seemed that her high school experience and her experience at Stowe contrasted with one another with the former experience including play, and with the latter experience eschewing it. Thus, in line with her high school experience, which strongly resonated with Jane, Jane believed that play should be included in the classroom. For instance, when asked if she would include play in her future early childhood classroom, she wrote "I will definitely encourage play in my primary classroom" (2007, Jane's IIECE). It seemed that Jane's affective response to these experiences led them to influence her beliefs about play differently. Specifically, because her experience in a kindergarten classroom before college resonated with her more strongly than her experience at Stowe Academy, the former experience was a greater influence on her beliefs than the latter one.

Jane's example not only demonstrates the connection between feelings and experience described by Nespor (1987), it also provides another illustration of the symbiotic relationship between everyday and classroom experiences described by Vygotsky (1986). Specifically, based on her everyday experience of assisting in a kindergarten classroom prior to college, Jane seemed to believe play had an important role in the early childhood classroom. And, she seemed to use these beliefs to evaluate her experience at Stowe Academy stating "it just seems that compared to a lot of the other schools I would have worked in... they don't encourage play at Stowe and that everything is focused around the academic side" (2007, Jane's interview). Thus, based on

her everyday experience, Jane's incoming beliefs seemed to work their way up through her classroom experience by acting as a lens through which she could assess it.

This finding suggests that feelings may play a role in the symbiotic relationship between everyday and classroom experiences described by Vygotsky (1986). Specifically, experiences that resonate more strongly with the preservice teachers may affect whether preservice teachers rely more heavily on beliefs derived from their everyday experiences to assess their classroom experiences, or if they rely more heavily on their classroom experiences to add to or alter their incoming beliefs. This aligns with the position of other researchers who suggest that the strength of one's beliefs influences whether and how those beliefs change (Green, 1971; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). Vygotsky (1986) himself had begun to explore the role of emotions in thinking. Describing their relationship, he stated:

When we approach the problem of the interrelation between thought and language and other aspects of mind, the first question that arises is that of intellect and affect. Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of "thoughts thinking themselves," segregated from the fullness of life, from personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 10).

Although Vygotsky had begun to consider the role of affect on thinking, his untimely death in 1934 left his writing on this matter incomplete (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

In addition to demonstrating the relationship between feelings and experience by indicating that certain influences had shaped their beliefs about play more than others, the preservice teachers also evidenced this relationship by not citing certain experiences as shaping their beliefs about play. Specifically, four of the preservice teachers used experiences when describing their beliefs about play that they did not cite as influences on their beliefs. For instance, in her description of why she believed *science center* was play, Rose stated:

I just figured the science had the possibility to be really hands-on, so it could be really fun like when we went to the Kiddy Museum. All those things are either

science or history, but they're hands-on so more of a play thing (2007, Rose's interview).

During a previous introductory education course, Rose had gone to the Kiddy Museum and she drew on this experience to explain why she categorized the science center as play. Rose, however, did not cite this particular experience as an influence on her beliefs about play.

Similarly, Joan drew on her child development course at Hawkins when describing the importance of play in young children's lives but did not cite this course as an influence on her beliefs. She stated:

In my child development class we read a lot of articles about putting kids into school too early and how it could be really detrimental, and how kids need to develop their social and emotional skills before they are put into a classroom to learn academic skills. And by thrusting them into an academic classroom at three and four years old they are really losing out on developing their social and emotional skills (2007, Joan's interview).

Joan had taken this course the previous semester, and although she used it in her description, she did not cite it as an influence on her beliefs about play. Based on the relationship between feelings and experience described by Nespor (1987), it may be possible that these experiences did not resonate strongly enough for the preservice teachers to describe them as influences on their beliefs about play.

Not citing certain experiences as shaping their beliefs about play even though they referred to those experiences when describing their beliefs left me wondering whether and how "unacknowledged" experiences might influence preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Specifically, were there experiences that influenced the preservice teachers' beliefs that they neither cited as influences on their beliefs about play nor used when describing their beliefs? For instance, Jane was the only preservice teacher who neither cited her childhood experiences as shaping her beliefs about play nor referred to those experiences when describing her beliefs about play. On the one hand, this might represent "a changing pattern of influence" (Skamp & Mueller, 2001, p. 241). Specifically, Skamp and Mueller (2001), in their study of 12 student teachers' perceptions of what had

influenced their conceptions of teaching science, suggested that certain influences may fade over time and be replaced with newer more relevant experiences, such as student teaching. While it may be possible that the influence of Jane's childhood experiences had faded over time, empirical evidence also suggests that prior experiences, such as one's own childhood experience, shape preservice teachers' beliefs (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Levin & He, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). Thus, is it possible that these experiences had shaped Jane's beliefs, but that she was unaware or did not acknowledge them as influences?

Although Nespor's (1987) discussion of memory facilitation does not address the notion of "unacknowledged" experiences, the construct itself suggests that it may be possible. Specifically, if a person's emotional response to experience influences whether and how that experience shapes her beliefs, it may be possible that some experiences have such minimal resonance that their influence is no longer perceived by that person. Thus, the relationship between feelings and experience cited by Nespor (1987) becomes central to how experiences shape beliefs. That is, it may not be an experience in isolation that influences a preservice teacher's beliefs about play; but rather, her affective response to that experience that determines its degree of influence.

**Task definition.**

In addition to the relationship between feelings and experience, Nespor (1987) also suggested that teachers use feelings (i.e. affective and evaluative loading), ideals (i.e. alternativity), universal assumptions (i.e. existential presumption), and experience (i.e. episodic storage) to define tasks. Specifically, Nespor (1987) stated that "beliefs perform the function of 'framing' or defining the task at hand" (p. 322). Thus, working together these influences shape how teachers define and approach their work.

Like practicing teachers, at times, the preservice teachers seemed to utilize multiple influences when defining play and its role in the early childhood classroom. For instance, Rose seemed to draw on all four influences as she grappled with her



counterintuitive categorization of *naptime* as play. Specifically, during our member-check, Rose decided to move this activity, which she had categorized as play during our interview, to not play and in so doing seemed to use her feelings, ideals, universal assumptions, and experiences to explain her decision. After she re-categorized this activity we had the following exchange:

**Me:** So, talk to me about what you moved.

**Rose:** ...I had naptime under play. I'm not really sure why. Maybe, I assumed they probably weren't napping during that time. It has been awhile since I had naptime...

**Me:** And, where did you move it to?

**Rose:** Not play.

**Me:** And, why do you think of it as being not play?

**Rose:** I don't know. I guess just because maybe after being in the classroom realizing that they are pretty tired. And, also, I kind of remembered it as something that if you were moving around a lot or talking you would get in trouble for. So, it would be very structured by the nature of it to not be play (2007, Rose's member-check).

Rose seemed surprised by her initial decision to categorize *naptime* as play. She suggested that her initial categorization may have been based on her universal assumption that children do not sleep during naptime. Then, drawing on her recent experience in a kindergarten classroom at Stowe Academy, Rose revised her thinking. Specifically, she stated that through this experience she realized that children become tired during the day, perhaps suggesting that if children were given the opportunity to take a nap they might in fact sleep. Although Rose cited her field experience when describing why she re-categorized naptime from play to not play, the children in her kindergarten placement never had naptime. Thus, based on her idealized notion of kindergarteners, Rose seemed to envision children sleeping during naptime even though she did not witness this first hand. Finally, perhaps based on her emotional response to her childhood experience in which children got in trouble for talking and moving around during naptime, Rose came to the conclusion that naptime might be more structured and therefore "by the nature of

it” not play. Thus, Rose’s reasoning for re-categorizing naptime included all four influences suggested by Nespor (1987).

In a second instance, Lisa seemed to use all four influences when determining whether and how to include violent play in her classroom. Specifically, Lisa seemed comfortable with one violent play activity, *participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another*, while she seemed to have concerns about another, *pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie*. In describing whether or not she would include these activities in her classroom, Lisa stated:

...The cops and robbers thing, I wouldn't particularly mind you know [if they played this in class]. I don't not want that in the classroom, if the kids were playing that I would be fine with it. I think it's kind of normal. As weird as that sounds, I just remember playing games like that when I was a kid... [With] pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie if the situation happened I would deal with it. But, it's not something I'd want. You know I'm not like please be violent (2007, Lisa’s interview).

Based on her own childhood experience playing cops and robbers, Lisa seemed to believe that it would be okay for her own students to engage in this activity. However, because of her universal assumptions, which led her to equate violent play with violence, Lisa did not want children pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie.

Later in the semester, describing her response to Katch (2001), a book in which the author grappled with whether and how to include violent play in her own early childhood classroom, Lisa continued to wrestle with the inclusion of violent play in the early childhood classroom. She stated:

The violent play was interesting. And that’s something I still don’t know. I had a kid today who had a story and he just had animals and his ending was, “and then they all got killed in the dark.” And, I was like, “Well, that’s kind of sad, do you want to change that?” And, he did. I think with my own classroom I’ll feel more comfortable, but when you're in someone else's classroom right now I don't feel comfortable allowing the kids to act out the violet ones just because it's not my class to say that's okay. But when I’m in my own classroom... I mean, they are

going to see death and things like that on movies and T.V. I mean, I remember watching *Jaws* at the age of like five, you know? I'm sure sometimes they're going to want to express that or play like that. Some of the most fun games when I was little were the games where we were like "chase me," "kidnap me," I don't know. I think it's just kind of something where you don't know where to stand because you don't want to support violence because they're just kids, but at the same time, you know, they are just kids. So, when they're doing it, it might not have the meaning we put behind it and we don't want to make them more devious than I guess they really are (2007, Lisa's member-check).

Here, Lisa continued to draw on her childhood experience to explain her beliefs. In particular, she seemed to recall positively the violent games she herself had played as a child, describing them as "the most fun." Although she continued to draw on her own childhood experiences, she also seemed to draw on her prekindergarten placement at Stowe Academy and her course reading. For instance, Katch's distinction between violence and violent play seemed to have resonated with Lisa. Specifically, Lisa's statement that "when they're doing it [violent play] it might not have the meaning we put behind it and we don't want to make them more devious than I guess they really are" (2007, Lisa's member-check) aligned with Katch's suggestion that:

One thing I have learned...is the importance of making a clear distinction between pretend violence and behavior that hurts or frightens children. Pretend violence, like pointing a finger and saying 'bang' while a friend falls on the ground, does not hurt anyone, and the rules can be negotiated by everyone involved in the game. Real violence hurts bodies or feelings, is frightening, and is often closely connected with exclusion (p. 129).

Thus, Lisa seemed to find Katch's delineation between real violence and pretend violence plausible.

While reading Katch (2001) seemed to resonate with Lisa, her experience at Stowe Academy seemed to leave her feeling confused. She encountered violent content in a child's oral dictation and dramatization story and her inclination seemed to be to ask the child to change his story. Her decision to do so, however, did not appear to be based

on a first hand experience, but rather, her universal assumptions and ideals. For instance, although Lisa's mentor teacher did not seem to suggest that violent play was problematic, Lisa seemed to believe that teachers universally disapproved of violent play leading her to feel uncomfortable with the child's initial violent ending to his story. This universal disapproval seemed to be based on her idealized view that children should not engage in this type of play, a view that contrasted with her own childhood experiences in which she herself engaged in these activities. Thus, working together, the influences on Lisa's beliefs about play seemed to leave her feeling uncertain about whether and how to include violent play in the early childhood classroom. Like Rose and Lisa, each of the preservice teachers seemed to use multiple influences to inform their beliefs about play.

Research on preservice teachers' beliefs has examined extensively the role of experience before and during teacher education on beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Levin & He, 2008; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). However, this research does not seem to focus on the relationship among experience, feelings, ideals, and universal assumptions. What Nesper (1987) suggests and what findings from this study support, is that a broader set of influences, beyond experience alone, have a complex interrelationship and work together to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

### ***Summary: Beyond Experience***

In this section, I illustrated the influences beyond experience that seemed to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play (Nesper, 1987). In addition, I described how these influences work in concert to support memory facilitation and task definition (Nesper, 1987). In the next section, I conclude by discussing the relationship between the foundational elements of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the structure of their beliefs.

## **Section Conclusion: The Relationship Between the Foundation of Beliefs and Their Structure**

The influences outlined by Nespor (1987)—feelings, ideals, universal assumptions, and experiences—and by Vygotsky (1986)—everyday and classroom experiences—not only illustrate what shapes thinking, they also lay the foundation for the structure of thought itself (see Figure 2). Nespor (1987) posited that the influences shaping beliefs lead belief systems, or clusters of beliefs, to be *non-consensual* and *unbounded*. In terms of non-consensuality, because of the influences that shape beliefs, belief systems are “simply not open to outside evaluation or critical examination in the same sense that the components of knowledge systems are” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321). Thus, unlike knowledge systems which are based on “...well-established canons of argument” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321), belief systems are personal. In addition to non-consensuality, the influences on beliefs also lead them to be unbounded, which Nespor defined as “...loosely-bounded systems with highly variable and uncertain linkages to events, situations, and knowledge systems...” (p. 321). And, because belief systems are loosely-structured and not well-defined, “...they can be extended in radical and unpredictable ways” (p. 321).

While Nespor (1987) suggested multiple influences shape the structure of belief systems, Vygotsky (1986) focused on one influence, experience, and how two distinct forms of it shape conceptual development. Specifically, he suggested that spontaneous concepts, which he described as “situational, empirical, and practical” (p. 194), develop informally through everyday experiences and scientific concepts, which he described as “conscious and deliberate” (p. 194) develop formally through classroom experiences. In addition to delineating between two types of concept formation, Vygotsky provided a detailed three phased continuum of conceptual development. In the first phase of Vygotsky’s (1986) continuum of conceptual development, *heaps*, an individual’s understanding is based on her subjective impressions alone (Blunden, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986) and ideas are “linked by chance” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 110). In the second phase, *complexes*, individuals base their understanding on “*bonds actually existing between objects*” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 112) which develop from their direct experiences. For a

person thinking in complexes a word may have multiple meanings and these meanings may fluctuate, that is they may "...be changed one or more times" (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 264). Furthermore, unlike the unifying logic of concepts, complexes may contain internal inconsistencies and be contradictory (Vygotsky, 1986). In the third phase, *concepts*, "abstracted traits are synthesized anew and the resulting abstracted traits become the main instrument of thought" (Blunden, 1997, p. 8).

In terms of influences laying the foundations for beliefs, Nespor's (1987) and Vygotsky's (1986) work again seems to be complementary. Specifically, the second phase of Vygotsky's three phase continuum of conceptual development, *complexes*, provides an analogous lens for examining the non-consensual and unbounded qualities of belief systems. In the next section of this chapter, I explore the content of the preservice teachers' beliefs by combining the structural elements of belief systems, non-consensuality and unboundedness (Nespor, 1987), with three distinguishing features of complexes, multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions (Vygotsky, 1986).

### **CONTENT OF THE PRESERVICE TEACHER'S BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY**

In this section, I describe what the preservice teachers believed about play. To facilitate this discussion, I have divided this section into three parts. In the first, *Non-consensuality and the Multiple Meanings of Play*, I explore the individualized quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs by describing the multiple meaning that they attributed to play. In the second, *Unboundedness: Fluctuating and Contradictory Beliefs about Play*, I explore the loosely-structured quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play by describing the uneven manner in which they surfaced their beliefs and the inconsistencies within their beliefs. Finally, in the section's conclusion, *Beliefs as a Developmental Milestone in Conceptualizing Play*, I discuss how the structural elements of the preservice teachers' beliefs might signify a developmental milestone in their conceptualization of play.

## **Non-Consensuality and the Multiple Meanings of Play**

In this section, I explore the individualized quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs by describing the multiple meaning that they attributed to play. Nespor (1987) has suggested that because belief systems are based on experiences, feelings, ideals, and universal assumptions they are “simply not open to outside evaluation or critical examination in the same sense that the components of knowledge systems are” (p. 321), thus beliefs are personal. The notion of non-consensuality aligns with a central feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely, that they have multiple meanings. Specifically, Vygotsky found that for individuals thinking in complexes (a) one term may vary in meaning from person to person and (b) an individual may assign multiple meanings to one term. In line with this quality of complexes, both on an individual and group level the seven preservice teachers demonstrated that *play* had multiple meanings. That is, as a group the preservice teachers surfaced multiple meanings of play. However, even though commonalities existed among some of the attributes used by the preservice teachers to describe play—for instance, seven of the preservice teachers described play as child and not teacher determined, six of the preservice teachers described play as creative and imaginative, and five of the preservice teachers described play as fun—no two preservice teachers used the same combination of attributes to define play. Instead, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, they strung these attributes together in unique ways. Thus, for each of the preservice teachers, play seemed to have an individualized meaning consisting of multiple parts. After providing an overview of the multiple meanings of play surfaced by all seven preservice teachers, I describe how play had an individualized meaning for each of them.

### ***Overview of the Multiple Meanings of Play***

As a group, the preservice teachers surfaced multiple meanings of play. Table 3 demonstrates the multiple attributes surfaced by the preservice teachers to describe play. The first column lists the three broader categories that I identified across the preservice teachers' responses, namely, (a) *characteristics: play is...*; (b) *types: play includes...*; (c) *places: play occurs...*; and the 26 individual attributes that I identified as falling within

these categories. The second column lists the number of preservice teachers who used a particular category and its attributes in her description of play while the third column lists the individual preservice teachers who utilized each attribute and category. For consistency, the preservice teachers' names are listed in the following order: Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary and Kate. In the fourth column, I have presented examples of the preservice teachers' statements that reflect a particular attribute. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather brief illustrations of a particular attribute.

Table 3: Attributes Used to Describe Play

Categories	No.	List of preservice teachers	Examples
<b>Characteristic</b> <i>Play is...</i>	<b>n=7</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate</b>	
Child-determined/not teacher determined	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	Play is "a little less regulated" (2007, Lisa's interview). "Something they do of their own accord I feel is play versus when it is assigned as work" (2007, Jane's interview). "I consider play to be less structured... to be less involved with the teacher" (2007, Mary's interview).
Creative and Imaginative	n=6	Lisa, Jane, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	Play is "based on their own imagination" (2007, Rose's interview). "I think art center and music center is creative... they allow them to be creative and I think that a lot of play is creative—getting to use a different part of the brain than just pure academics" (2007, Joan's interview).
Fun	n=5	Lisa, Sue, Rose, Joan, Kate	Play is "more fun...a little less like school" (2007, Lisa's interview). Play is "fun, fun itself, because sometimes school work is really not" (2007, Kate's member-check).
Less serious	n=3	Lisa, Mary, Kate	Play is "more free-spirited" (2007, Mary's interview).
Not focused on a specific outcome	n=3	Sue, Joan, Mary	"...during play they have the choice to learn or not... they don't have to. It's not 'I have to take this down now and remember it'" (2007, Sue's interview).
Physically active	n=3	Rose, Joan, Kate	Play is "something they [get] to be active and moving around" (2007, Rose's interview).
Socially interactive	n=3	Joan, Rose, Mary	"I think that play involves a sense of social interaction" (2007, Joan's interview).
Less academic	n=2	Sue, Kate	I thought play was "the parts that were less oriented towards math, science, reading and writing, that left a lot of freedom" (2007, Kate's interview).
Uncertain	n=2	Mary, Kate	"What is play?" (2007, Mary's interview)



Affective	n=1	Jane	Children feel "...more emotions than in not play... [not play] it's not really emotional in any sort of way" (2007, Jane's interview).
Viewed as a reward	n=1	Sue	Play "would be more on the reward side, if they do something good they get to go to centers, or play games, or have snacks" (2007, Sue's interview).
Passive learning	n=1	Sue	Play "doesn't involve any brain work" (2007, Sue's member check).
Not driven by externally imposed rules	n=1	Joan	Board games are "relaxing and you don't have to follow the rules of the classroom" (2007, Joan's interview).
Relaxing	n=1	Joan	Board games are "relaxing and you don't have to follow the rules of the classroom" (2007, Joan's interview).
Positive	n=1	Joan	"I think play also needs to be productive... [have] a positive outcome" (2007, Joan's interview).
Valuable	n=1	Mary	"...whatever play is, it is definitely important" (2007, Mary's interview).
Based on perspective	n=1	Mary	"...what is play? In the student's opinion? If you ask a five-year-old what play is she'll probably say 'When my doll and I have teatime.' And, if you ask a teacher or adult what is play they might have a completely different opinion" (2007, Mary's interview).
<b>Form</b> <i>Play includes...</i>	<b>n=5</b>	<b>Lisa, Sue, Rose, Joan, Kate</b>	
Playing games	n=3	Lisa, Sue, Joan	"A game is playing" (2007, Sue's interview).
Pretending	n=3	Lisa, Joan, Kate	"All pretending I decided was play, even drama" (2007, Kate's interview).
House Center	n=2	Lisa, Rose	"...arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center...I wouldn't say that arguing is play, but it obviously comes up while you're playing" (2007, Lisa's interview).
Swinging	n=1	Lisa	Me: "The swinging would be play?" Lisa: "Yeah" (2007, Lisa's interview).
Group activity	n=1	Rose	Figuring out how to join a group busy with an activity, "even though it's [a group activity] designated playtime, it's [figuring out how to join a group] not fun and play" (2007, Rose's interview).
Singing	n=1	Kate	"I feel like all of the singing I would consider play" (2007, Kate's interview).
Toys	n=1	Kate	Play "involve[s] toys" (2007, Kate's interview).
<b>Place</b> <i>Play occurs...</i>	<b>n=3</b>	<b>Sue, Joan, Mary</b>	
On the Playground/ Outside	n=2	Sue, Joan	Asking if you can have a turn on the swings, I "pictured a playground and so that would be play definitely" (2007, Sue's member-check).
At home	n=1	Mary	"I do more of what you could do in a school setting [not play] versus what you would do in a house setting [play]" (2007, Mary's interview).

As indicated by the table, some overlap existed among the broader categories and individual attributes used by the preservice teachers to describe play, while others were unique to an individual preservice teacher. In order to contextualize the discussion in the section entitled *Individualized Meaning of Play* that follows, in the remainder of this

current section I provide an overview of the multiple meanings the preservice teachers attributed to play. Specifically, I describe the similarities and differences among the characteristics, forms, and places the preservice teachers used to define play.

**Characteristics: Play is...**

With the first category, all seven preservice teachers described play using underlying characteristics that they attributed to it. Defining play by its characteristics reflects the *play characteristic discourse* described by Ailwood (2003), in which play is broken down into a list of perceived attributes. This is a common approach used by children (Howard et al., 2006; King, 1979), practicing teachers (Bennett et al., 1997; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007) and early childhood education researchers (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Johnson et al. 1999, 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Rubin et al., 1983) to define play.

There appeared to be several overlapping characteristics used by the preservice teachers; for instance, all seven of the preservice teachers seemed to believe that who controlled the activity, that is who chose it and/or who structured it, the child or the teacher, factored into their determination of whether or not it was play. The preservice teachers' collective use of this characteristic aligns with children and some practicing teachers who also seem to believe that who controls the activity determines whether or not it is play (Bennett et al., 1997; Howard et al., 2006; King, 1979; Ranz-Smith, 2007). In addition, it reflects a characteristic commonly used in play literature to define play, namely, that it's freely chosen by the child himself or herself (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005). Some have challenged the extent to which play can be child-determined in the authoritarian environment of most school settings (Ailwood, 2003; Burman, 2008; Cannella, 2002). As I will discuss later in the chapter (see *Contradictions*), this is an issue that seemed to surface for the preservice teachers in this study as well.

In line with play being child and not teacher determined, six of the preservice teachers described play as creative and imaginative. Presumably, because play is not structured for children they have the opportunity to create original works rather than

produce standardized products. Like the preservice teachers, some practicing teachers believe that creativity is an essential element of play (King, 1979; Moon & Reifel, 2008). For instance, Ms. Joyce, the teacher in Moon and Reifel's (2008) study, seemed to equate creativity with play, stating that "I think play is creativity" (p. 56). Although some of the preservice teachers in this study and practicing teachers generally have emphasized the connection between creativity and play, children have not been found to describe play in this manner, perhaps suggesting a disconnect between adults' and children's views of what constitutes play in a classroom setting (King, 1979).

Fun, or the extent to which an activity is enjoyable, was a final characteristic the majority of the preservice teachers used to describe play. Like creativity, this is an element of play used by some practicing teachers when defining play (Bennett, et al., 1997; King, 1979; Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007) and used in play literature to characterize play (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995). While adults seem to believe that play is fun, children have not been found to characterize play in this manner (Howard et al., 2006; King, 1979). Thus, as with creativity, there seems to be a disconnect between adults' and children's beliefs about whether or not play is inherently enjoyable, an issue which has been addressed by some early childhood researchers (Ailwood, 2003; Burman, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997). For instance, Ailwood (2003) has suggested that characterizing play as fun is rooted in adults' "nostalgic vision" of play from their childhood and not in the reality of play and play activities (p. 292). According to Burman (2008), positioning play as fun "ignores the coercive, cruel and dangerous aspects of many forms of play" (p. 265). Similar to the extent to which play can be child determined, the preservice teachers who described play as fun also seemed to view it as challenging, an issue I will discuss in greater length later in this chapter (see *Contradictions*).

While the majority of preservice teachers described play as child and not teacher determined, as creative/imaginative, and as fun, there were several characteristics used by only two or three preservice teachers. For instance, three of the preservice teachers described play as less-serious, such as Lisa who described play as "light-hearted" (2007, Lisa's interview). Here, I make a distinction between feeling enjoyment and feeling

carefree with the former suggesting that children feel pleasure during play (i.e. it is fun) and with the latter suggesting that children feel less concern during play.

In a second instance of a characteristic overlapping among a small subset of the preservice teachers, three of the preservice teachers described play as not having a required outcome which parallels a feature of play commonly cited in play literature, namely, that play is process over product oriented (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Rubin et al., 1983). Here, the focus of play is “on the activity itself, rather than on the goals of the activity” (Johnson et al., 1999, p. 16). Thus, instead of focusing on correctly completing a task, during play children can focus on engaging in the activity for its “own sake” (Johnson et al., 1999, p. 16).

In a third instance of a characteristic used by a small subset of the preservice teachers, three of the preservice teachers described play as physically active. Within the field of early childhood education, variation exists among whether or not to describe play as active. Like these three preservice teachers, some researchers include it when defining play, (Garvey, 1990; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Rubin et al., 1983) while others eschew it (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Those who exclude activity from their definitions of play suggest that defining play in these terms limits it to activities that are physically engaging alone and consequently excludes activities in which children may be mentally but not physically engaged, such as with daydreaming (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al. 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Klugman & Fasoli (1995), however, who characterized play as being actively engaged in, included both mental and physical engagement in their description of it. For the three preservice teachers who used this characteristic, such as Rose who described play as something in which “they [get] to be active and moving around” (2007, Rose’s interview), it seemed that active had a narrow definition, namely that children are physically engaged in the activity.

In addition to describing play as physically active, three preservice teachers described play as socially interactive. That is, they seemed to believe that play involves interaction with one’s peers. Although this is not a characteristic used by teachers to define play, children have recently been found to associate play with social interaction.

For instance, Howard et al. (2006) found that the 92 participants in their study, who were between the ages of 4 and 6 years old, were more likely to identify pictures of children playing cooperatively or in parallel as play than they were of children playing alone. Thus, these preservice teachers' use of social interaction in their description of play seemed to reflect some children's beliefs about play, namely, that it is as an activity engaged in with others.

In another instance of a characteristic used by a small subset of preservice teachers, two of the preservice teachers described play as less-academic. For instance, perhaps connected to Kate's belief that play provides more "freedom" (2007, Kate's interview) and is "less involved with the teacher" (2007, Kate's member check) and that academics are more "structured" (2007, Kate's interview) and teacher-directed, Kate did not describe play in terms of academics. It was not that play could never involve academics, for instance, she categorized *math games* and *games that teach literacy skills* as play; however, in general, "academics" did not characterize play for her. As Kate herself stated, she considered "the parts that were less oriented towards math, science, reading and writing, that left a lot of freedom" to be play (2007, Kate's interview). Like Kate, Sue, who also categorized *math games* and *games that teach literacy skills* as play, seemed to believe that play could include academic content, but it was not an attribute that she used to characterize an activity as play. For instance, she described *playing a musical instrument in Music class* as play because she did not "see that as academic" (2007, Sue's member-check).

In a final instance of a characteristic used by a small subset of preservice teachers, two of the preservice teachers described play as uncertain. For instance, as previously noted, Kate suggested that she could identify play activities but did not have an overarching definition for play. And, Mary raised questions about defining play generally, stating "I think play isn't defined. And I wrote on my paper [in which she categorized activities] what is play?" (2007, Mary's interview). Thus, for these two preservice teachers play had an uncertain quality that made it difficult to define. This perspective reflects the complicated quality of play and the challenges of defining it generally (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999, 2005; Klugman &

Fasoli, 1995; McLane et al., 1996). Although each of these preservice teachers believed play was uncertain, as demonstrated in Table 3, they also associated multiple attributes with play.

While some characteristics that I identified were used by multiple preservice teachers, certain characteristics were suggested by only one preservice teacher. For instance, Jane was the only preservice teacher to describe play as affective. This broader view of play as emotive contrasted with other preservice teachers in this study and with practicing teachers who have described play as being fun exclusively (Bennett et al., 1997; King, 1979; Moon & Reifel, 2008). In contrast, Jane's belief seemed to reflect theorists, such as Freud and Erickson, who position play as an outlet for expressing a broad range of emotions (Frost et al., 2005, 2008).

In a second instance, Sue was the only preservice teacher to characterize play as a reward, that is, something children are permitted to engage in when they have done "something good," such as completing their work. From this perspective, play is an additive and not an integrated part of the classroom curriculum (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). In addition, Sue was the only preservice teacher to describe play as involving passive learning. For instance, when describing the seven activities all of the preservice teachers had categorized as play—*Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*—she stated that they did not "involve any brainwork" (2007, Sue's member-check). Sue's description of play as passive contrasts with some practicing teachers who have described play as an "active learning mode" (Bennett et al., 1997, p. 52) and with play literature in general, which emphasizes the active construction of knowledge through play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

In a third instance, Joan was the only preservice teacher to describe play as relaxing, as not driven by externally imposed rules, and as positive. Joan surfaced the first two characteristics (i.e. that play is relaxing and not driven by externally imposed rules) when describing why she categorized *traditional board games* as play. She stated, "...it's relaxing and you don't have to follow the rules of the classroom. You're following a different set of rules" (2007, Joan's interview). Her suggestion that play is relaxing

aligns with classical relaxation theories of play in which play is positioned as a time to rejuvenate (Johnson et al., 199, 2005; Rubin et al., 1983). In addition, the notion that children can follow a different set of rules during play, suggested that although rules exist, those rules are dictated by the game and not externally imposed by the teacher. In defining play, researchers have both used (Rubin et al., 1983) and rejected (Sutton-Smith, 1997) the notion that play is free from externally imposed rules. For instance, Rubin et al. (1983) cited freedom from externally imposed rules as a distinguishing characteristic between games and play. Sutton-Smith (1997), however, suggested it is “a relatively useless distinction because the notion of ‘rule imposition’ allows for no subtlety in gradients of imposition in everyday life, nor in its various meanings in context” (p. 189). Joan seemed to use this characteristic not to distinguish between games and play, but as a subtle distinction between play and not play activities.

In addition to being the only preservice teacher to describe play as relaxing and free from externally imposed rules, Joan was also the only preservice teacher to describe play as positive. Joan surfaced this characteristic while describing her categorization of *pretending to be a character from a violent rated-R movie* and *participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another* as middle. Because Joan believed “pretending is play” (2007, Joan’s interview), she associated these two activities with play. However, because she believed these activities were not positive, she did not believe they were exclusively play. Her position aligns with some practicing teachers who feel that violent play negatively impacts children (King, 1992; Malloy & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). In her review of literature, King (1992) noted that teachers’ reasons for eschewing violent play in their classrooms “...may have less to do with their dislike of violence, aggression and weaponry and more to do with their desire to promote an ideal form of play” (p. 56), a notion reflected in Joan’s belief that play should be positive. While Joan’s position aligns with some practicing teachers, it contrasts with other teachers and researchers who have found that violent play may have social and emotional benefits for children both inside and outside of the classroom (Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Holland, 2003; Katch, 2001; King, 1992; Malloy & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). For instance, Holland (2003) studied nine London-based childcare centers in which the

removed the zero-tolerance policy for war play. Eight out of the nine centers reported no increase in aggression. In addition, those eight centers found other benefits including improved social skills between boys, less tension between adults and children, and a renewed interest in pretend play generally.

In a final example of characteristics described by only one preservice teacher, Mary suggested that play is based on perspective and that it is valuable. In terms of play being based on perspective, Mary noted that children and adults might view play differently, stating:

If you ask a five-year-old what play is she'll probably say 'When my doll and I have teatime.' And, if you ask a teacher or adult what is play they might have a completely different opinion. Maybe they'll think play is when kids are in a circle playing handclapping games (2007, Mary's interview).

Here, Mary's thinking aligns with King's (1979) finding that children and teachers have divergent definitions of play with children defining play as child-determined and with teachers defining it as fun and creative. In addition to addressing perspective, Mary was also the only preservice teacher to describe play as valuable, stating "whatever play is, it is definitely important" (2007, Mary's interview). Viewing play as valuable assumes an underlying and unquestioned goodness to play, which Ailwood (2003) has suggested reflects "the dominant western view that children *need* play" (p. 289). As I will discuss later in the chapter (see *Contradictions*), all of the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play is valuable, but Mary was the only preservice teacher to include it in her definition.

**Form: Play includes...**

Unlike the first category, *characteristics*, which all seven preservice teachers utilized, only five of the preservice teachers used the second category, *forms*, in their descriptions of play. And, among the responses that I placed into this category, minimal overlap existed among the types of play the preservice teachers cited. Some of the preservice teachers used the form of the activity when categorizing or describing activities they considered exclusively play, such as Kate who stated "I feel like all of the



singing I would consider play” (2007, Kate’s interview) and Sue who stated “a game is playing” (2007, Sue’s interview). While others, such as Lisa, seemed to surface this attribute of play while describing her reason for categorizing certain activities as middle—such as *asking if you can have a turn on the swings*. In these instances, Lisa seemed to separate the form of the activity, which she considered to be play, with the communication occurring during the activity. For instance, Lisa believed that swinging was play, but *asking* to swing was not play stating:

**Lisa:** asking if you can have a turn on the swings... obviously if you're outside playing you're going to ask, but I wouldn't say the act of asking was playing.

**Me:** The swinging would be play?

**Lisa:** Yeah (2007, Lisa’s interview).

Lisa’s distinction between the play activity and the communication occurring during it aligns with Garvey and Bateson who have suggested that individuals use various forms of communication to indicate whether or not they are engaged in play (Bateson, 1972; Frost et al., 2005, 2008). Specifically, Bateson (1972) suggested that play occurs when the meaning of the actions being engaged in do not stand for their usual meaning (Frost et al., 2005; Reifel & Yeatman, 1993), a proposition that he illustrated through animal’s play, stating that “the playful nip denotes a bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (p. 180). Although the action of “play biting” is similar to the action of “real biting,” the underlying meanings are different. For Lisa, the activity itself, swinging, was play but because children did not approach it as play (i.e. they were not in a play frame), she did not consider the communication illustrated in these examples to be part of the play activity.

Practicing teachers also have been found to define play by its form, such as teachers who have described games as being play (Moon & Reifel, 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007). In addition, early childhood education researchers use particular types of activities to define play, such as functional play, symbolic play, constructive play, and games with rules (Fein & Stork, 1981; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Piaget, 1962; Rubin et al., 1983; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Youngquist & Pataray-Ching, 2004). Their purpose for doing so, however, contrasted with the preservice teachers in this study

in that they focused on the observable behavior demonstrated during a particular activity rather than the activity itself. Thus, rather than an activity being synonymous with play as it was for the preservice teachers, for instance Sue's statement that "a game is playing," for researchers the child's behavior, whether or not she is engaged in functional play, symbolic play, etc., provides information about the child's development level. For instance, Piaget (1962) suggested that from a developmental standpoint children who are engaged in games with rules, such as tag, are further along in their development than those engaged in functional play, such as shaking a pacifier back and forth. This was not how the preservice teachers used forms of play; rather, they seemed to believe the specific activity itself (e.g. swinging) reified play.

**Place: Play occurs...**

Place, or where an activity occurs, was a third category used by three of the preservice teachers to describe play. Mary used place, whether an activity occurred at home or at school, to determine whether a particular activity would be appropriately categorized as play or not play respectively. In contrast to the broad fashion in which Mary used place, Sue and Joan used place more narrowly to describe an individual attribute of a particular play activity. For instance, Joan described kickball as play in part because it occurred "outside" (2007, Joan's interview) and Sue determined that *asking if you can have a turn on the swings* would be play because she "...pictured a playground and so that would be play definitely" (2007, Sue's member-check). Within play literature, the notion of place can be found within a broader discussion of context, which in addition to place, may include materials and time, as well as personal, familial, cultural, and historical contexts (King, 1992; Monighan-Nourot, 1997; Rubin et al., 1983). Even though researchers have found a connection between one's culture and how it manifests itself in play (Farver & Shin, 1997; Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Riojas-Cortez, 2001), none of the preservice teachers in this study described play in cultural terms. Rather, the three preservice teachers who addressed context seemed to refer to place alone, namely, where they believed the activity would occur.

Thus, across the group, the preservice teachers surfaced multiple meanings of play. The meanings they surfaced seemed to align with and diverge from those offered by children, practicing teachers, and early childhood education researchers. In addition, although some of the meanings of play described by the preservice teachers overlapped—such as play is child and not teacher determined, creative/imaginative, and fun—others were unique to an individual preservice teacher—such as Joan’s belief the play is positive and Lisa’s belief that swinging is play. Regardless of whether or not more than one preservice teacher utilized a broader category or an individual attribute within a category, as I discuss in the next section, no two preservice teachers used the same combination of attributes to describe play.

### ***Individualized Meaning of Play***

Although overlap existed among the meanings that the preservice teachers attributed to play, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, the preservice teachers strung these attributes together in unique ways. Thus, each preservice teacher had an individualized understanding of play that consisted of multiple parts. To illustrate the multiple meanings that play had for each preservice teacher and the individualized quality of those meanings, I present a mini-portrait of what one preservice teacher, Sue, believed constituted play. Then, building on this “descriptive base” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 29), I demonstrate how the preservice teachers’ unique understandings of play led them to: (a) categorize the same activities differently and (b) assign different meanings to identical categorizations of an activity as play.

#### **Sue’s definition of play.**

All seven preservice teachers used multiple attributes to define play. For instance, Sue used eight attributes when describing play including that play is child-determined; play is fun; play is a reward; play involves passive learning; play is less academic; play is a game; play focuses on process over product; and play occurs outside/on the playground. These attributes seemed to grow out of the multiple influences that had shaped Sue’s beliefs. Specifically, Sue believed that both everyday and classroom experiences

(Vygotsky, 1986), had influenced her thinking about play. In addition, Sue believed her feelings, referred to by Nespor (1987) as affective and evaluative loading had also shaped her beliefs. Beyond the influences cited by Sue herself, it seemed that Sue's beliefs were also based on her more recent experiences as a college student, her idealized images of play, referred to by Nespor (1987) as alternativity, and her universal assumptions about play, referred to by Nespor (1987) as existential presumption.

Affective and evaluative loading (Nespor, 1987), or Sue's feelings about a particular activity, seemed central to how she defined play. For instance, in categorizing activities as play, Sue relied on a single attribute, namely whether or not she believed the activity was fun. Specifically, she stated that the play activities represented:

What would be fun for me... if I were to decide to play...I would not play flashcards because in college flashcards means you're studying, you're cramming for that test. I would not play writing the ABCs that reminds me of writing essays. I would not play writing a story that is an essay thing too. Listening to a book on tape, that would not be play...because I wouldn't be listening to a book on tape in the first place (2007, Sue's Interview).

It seemed that Sue's affective response to an activity influenced her categorization of it. She also seemed to draw on an "unacknowledged" influence as well. Specifically, Sue seemed to base her categorizations in part on what she believed would be fun for her as a college student. Although these more recent college experiences seemed to shape her beliefs, Sue herself did not cite them as influencing her beliefs about play. The exclusion of her college experience as an influence may reflect the notion of memory facilitation, which Nespor (1987) described as the relationship between a person's affective response to an event in her life and the extent to which that experience informs her beliefs. Thus, in relation to the other experiences that had shaped Sue's beliefs about play, Sue's college experiences may have resonated so minimally with her that she did not perceive them as an influence on her beliefs.

Sue's comment that she marked activities as play based on her personal preferences led to a discussion about whether an activity was play only if she herself considered it to be fun:

*Me:* What about addition, if a child thought addition was fun would that be considered play?

*Sue:* Yes, because I see people who would love to have a math worksheet, and just do math. Like, the Mad Minutes...do you know what those are?

*Me:* Yes.

*Sue:* My little sister loves those. And she will sit down and do that instead of chores or something.

*Me:* So, that for her would be play?

*Sue:* Yes (2007, Sue's Interview).

Here, instead of focusing on her own affective response to an experience, Sue seemed to draw on her experiences with her sister; an experience that she herself described as influencing her beliefs about play. Sue stated:

I have cousins and siblings and they're really small and I'll tell them "You need to go read," and they'll go "Ahhh." And so, I know for them that's not play. But, I'll tell them "You can go watch T.V." and they're like, "Yes!" Play for my sisters would also be art things. I don't know if that is for everybody, but I think for most kids. It's just something you don't have to think about as much, it's just free. They'll be like "Can I borrow your paint?" and then if I say "Yes," they'll be like "Yes!" and so that would be play for them (2007, Sue's member-check).

Through her experience with young children, Sue had observed that they too find play enjoyable. Thus, while Sue initially based her categorization of activities as play on her personal preferences alone, her first hand experiences with siblings and cousins also seemed to influence her beliefs.

In addition to her personal preferences, current experiences as a college student, and her experiences with younger members of her family, a number of play attributes described by Sue, such as play is child-determined, play is a reward, play involves passive learning, play is less academic, and play focuses on process over product, seemed to reflect her childhood experiences. In describing the influence of her childhood on her beliefs about play, Sue stated:

... [When I was a child] it was always work time and there was playtime. Work time was doing homework maybe like a math worksheet or reading something, like reading for class. And then, watching T.V. or personally for me it was drawing because I would always find myself drawing and my parents would be like 'go do your homework, that's not what you need to be doing right now.' It was clear cut, playing wasn't ever encouraged and of course we did it anyway. But, it was always 'you need to be doing your work,' or 'you need to be doing chores,' or just working. And work for I guess my parents, would have been class work or homework or anything for school that you had to do for a grade. And then, maybe like housework and things like that. But, drawing, I didn't need that for a grade. And so, it would be considered play to me and my parents... (2007, Sue's member-check).

As a child, Sue's parents seemed to dichotomize work and play with each embodying the opposite qualities of the other.

In line with her childhood experiences, Sue suggested similar distinctions between play and not play during our discussions. For instance, while describing the difference between activities she and the other seven preservice teachers had described as play—*Play-Doh, dress-up clothes, tag, traditional board games, water/sand table, kickball, and pretending to be a superhero*—and not play—*writing the ABC's, listening to the teacher read a story, reading independently, calendar time, math worksheets, listening to a book on tape, lining up, saying the "Pledge of Allegiance," asking for help or information, following directions, and zipping up your jacket*—Sue stated that

[The play group] doesn't involve any brainwork. It doesn't involve preparing for a test. You can't really be tested on kickball or pretending to be a superhero. I think it's things you can test on [*referring to the not play group*] and things you can't test on [*referring to the play group*]" (2007, Sue's member check).

Sue's suggestion that play activities do not "involve any brainwork" and are "things you can't test on" seemed to align with Sue's childhood experience in which work involved effort on the part of the child, was connected to academic coursework and was completed for a grade. In another instance, Sue's suggestion that play is "more on the reward side, if

they [children] do something good they get to go to centers, or play games, or have snacks” (2007, Sue’s interview) also seemed to reflect her parents’ position that work takes precedence over play. Finally, Sue’s description of play as child-determined, namely “if the teacher was instituting it [*not play*] or if the student was doing it on their own [*play*]” (2007, Sue’s Interview), seemed to align with Sue’s childhood experiences in which work was required by her parents and play was voluntary.

In addition to everyday experiences, Sue’s definition of play seemed to be based on her experience at Stowe Academy, and on alternativity (Nespor, 1987), that is her ideal image of play. For instance, when delineating between play centers and not play centers, Sue stated:

I put the art, music, math and science centers as play. And, then the house center as play also. But the reading and the writing centers was not because... I don't know... it's not quite... I don't see them playing when they read or playing when they write (2007, Sue’s interview).

Vygotsky (1986) has suggested that concepts developed from everyday experiences and those developed from classroom experiences “...are related to and constantly influence each other” (p. 157). In line with Vygotsky’s proposition, and perhaps using her previous everyday experiences to define “playing,” Sue believed that the behavior she observed in the writing center and reading center were not play.

According to Sue, her kindergarten placement at Stowe Academy had some centers, such as an art center, math center, science center, reading center, and writing center; however, the classroom did not have a music center or house center. Because during our interview Sue indicated that this was her first experience in an early childhood classroom, it was unclear whether or not she had ever seen a music center or a house center. If she had not, her decision to categorize these activities as play may have been based on an idealized notion of what she believed the music center and house center to be, rather than on any first hand experience with them.

Beyond drawing on her experiences and feelings to define play, Sue seemed to rely on universal assumptions to categorize activities as play. Referred to as existential presumption by Nespor (1987), Sue made statements about play that suggest she believed

her beliefs represented a universal perspective. For instance, when describing why she believed *asking if you can have a turn on the swings* was play, she stated that she “pictured a playground and so that would be play definitely” (2007, Sue’s member-check). Here, Sue’s use of the term “definitely” suggested a universal assumption that all activities occurring on a playground are play. Thus, drawing on multiple influences to define play, a practice referred to by Nespor (1987) as task definition, Sue surfaced eight attributes when describing play including that play is child-determined; play is fun; play is a reward; play involves passive learning; play is less academic; play is a game; play focuses on process over product; and play occurs outside/on the playground.

#### **Variation in the categorization and characterization of play activities.**

Like Sue, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, each of the preservice teachers not only used a unique combination of attributes to define play, they also strung these attributes together in unique ways. Specifically, the preservice teachers seemed (a) to categorize the same activities differently and (b) to assign different meanings to identical categorizations of an activity as play. In terms of categorizing the same activities differently, even when the preservice teachers’ definitions of play overlapped, their categorization of activities as play varied. For instance, Sue’s and Joan’s descriptions of play overlapped in several areas including that play is child-determined; play is fun; play is a game; play occurs outside/on the playground; and play focuses on process over product. However, their descriptions of play also diverged from one another, for instance Joan described play as being creative/imaginative, relaxing, positive, socially interactive, physically active, as involving pretend and as not being driven by classroom rules while Sue described play as being a reward, as involving passive learning and as being less academic.

Even though their definitions of play overlapped across several attributes, they categorized the same activity, *pretending to be George Washington*, differently with Sue categorizing it as not play and Joan categorizing it as play. Sue seemed to consider pretending to be George Washington not play because she believed children would not choose to engage in it stating that “most kids would not pretend to be George Washington



just because he's not as cool as Batman. So, that would probably be a teacher telling them to pretend to be George Washington” (2007, Sue’s interview). Sue’s description seemed related to her childhood experiences and to be based on her universal assumptions. Specifically, based on her childhood experiences, Sue believed that adults assign not play activities and that children voluntarily engage in play. For instance, Sue described how her parents required her to complete activities that were not play, such as “doing homework maybe like a math worksheet or reading something, like reading for class,” but that she freely chose to engage in play activities, such as “drawing” (2007, Sue’s member-check). Thus, Sue’s categorization of pretending to be George Washington seemed in part to be based on what she had learned about play as a child, namely that play is child-determined. In addition to being influenced by her childhood experiences, Sue’s categorization seemed to be based on her universal assumption that children would not choose to be George Washington. Instead, she suggested that they would prefer to pretend to be “Batman.” Because Sue believed children choose to engage in play, and based on her assumption that children would not voluntary choose to pretend to be George Washington, she believed that this activity was not play.

Like Sue, Joan characterized play as child-determined; however, Joan did not use this attribute when categorizing *pretending to be George Washington*. Instead, based on her feelings about the activity, she categorized it as play using a single attribute, namely that it was fun stating, “...you get to pretend to be somebody else, you know, have fun” (2007, Joan’s interview). Thus, Joan’s personal preference for pretending seemed to influence her categorization of this activity as play. As this example demonstrates, even though overlap existed among the attributes Sue and Joan used to define play, different influences seemed to shape how they applied those attributes which resulted in divergent categorizations of the same activity.

In addition to categorizing the same activities differently, at times the preservice teachers used different reasons to explain identical categorizations of an activity as play. For instance, Sue and Jane both categorized *singing the ABC’s* as play, but their grounds for doing so varied. Specifically, Sue believed *singing the ABC’s* was play because, as she stated, “...I don’t mind singing...” (2007, Sue’s Interview). Based on her affective

response to this activity, namely that she enjoyed it, Sue categorized this activity as play. In contrast, Jane, who also categorized *singing the ABC's* as play, did so for a different reason. Specifically, based on her first hand experience working with children, Jane believed that they could be creative during this activity and therefore categorized it as play. Explaining why she categorized *singing the ABC's* as play and *writing the ABC's* as not play, Jane stated:

...singing the ABCs, you don't necessarily have to sing that song that we all know. You can sing the ABCs in a different tune. I've heard kids make up their own songs to go with the ABCs and you can just be original and there is not just one right answer (2007, Jane's interview).

Because Jane believed that play is creative and she had heard children make up original tunes when they were singing the ABC's she categorized this activity as play. Thus, even when the preservice teachers categorized activities similarly, they might do so for different reasons.

Vygotsky (1986) used the difference between *referents*, the word itself, and *meaning* to describe how two people could apply different meanings to the same term. Specifically, he suggested that for individuals thinking in complexes, words "may coincide in their referents but not in their meanings" (p. 131). Thus, two people may use the same term, such as play, but based on their experiences the term itself may have a different meaning for each of them. For instance, although each of the preservice teachers used the term *play*, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs *play* had an individualized meaning. And, these individualized understandings of play led to divergent beliefs about which activities counted as play and what underlying qualities made an individual activity play. In this regard, the preservice teachers' beliefs about play were non-consensual, that is instead of conforming to "...well-established canons of argument" (Nespor, 1987, p. 321), the meaning of play was personal and varied from preservice teacher to preservice teacher.

Like the preservice teachers in this study, King (1979) found that the kindergarteners and kindergarten teachers in her study attributed different meanings to play versus work. Specifically, the children in her study seemed to believe that an activity

was play if they were “...free to choose the activity, the materials, and the course of events, and if the products or acts were individual and the teacher was not involved” (p. 85) while teachers believed an activity was play if it was fun and creative. Thus, the findings of this current study seem to affirm King’s by suggesting that multiple and not a singular definition of play exists and that even though individuals may use the term “play” its underlying meaning may vary. A contrast between King’s (1979) study and this current study, however, is that King examined two distinct groups, children and teachers, whereas I examined one intact group, namely preservice teachers enrolled in the same teacher education program. Thus, the finding of this current study suggests that not only may groups define and use the term *play* differently; individuals within a group may also define and use the term *play* differently.

Similar to this study, research on preservice teachers’ beliefs has also shown that preservice teachers have diverse beliefs (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Minor et al., 2002; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Smith, 1997). For instance, Calderhead and Robson’s (1991) year long qualitative study of 12 students enrolled in a teacher preparation program found that the preservice teachers had qualitatively different images of teaching. In line with these findings, the findings of this current study seem to suggest that even though overlap existed among their definitions of play; *play* itself had a unique meaning for each preservice teacher. Specifically, no two preservice teachers used the same combination of attributes to define play. Instead, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, they seemed to (a) string these attributes together in unique ways, (b) categorize the same activities differently, and (c) assign different meanings to identical categorizations of an activity as play.

### ***Summary: Non-Consensuality and Multiple Meanings***

The multiple meanings present within the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play, a feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, demonstrated the non-consensual quality of those beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Nespor (1987) has suggested that because belief systems are based on experiences, feelings, ideals, and universal assumptions they are “simply not open to outside evaluation or critical examination in the same sense that the components

of knowledge systems are” (p. 321), and thus beliefs are personal. In line with this proposition, for each of the preservice teachers in this study play seemed to have an individualized meaning.

### **Unboundedness: Fluctuating and Contradictory Beliefs About Play**

In this section, I explore the loosely-structured quality of the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play by describing the uneven manner in which they surfaced their beliefs and the inconsistencies within their beliefs. Nespor (1987) has suggested that in addition to being non-consensual, belief systems are unbounded, which he defined as “...loosely-bounded systems with highly variable and uncertain linkages to events, situations, and knowledge systems...” (p. 321). And, because belief systems are not well-defined and logically structured “...they can be extended in radical and unpredictable ways” (p. 321). The notion of unboundedness aligns with two features of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely, that they fluctuate and are contradictory. In line with complexes, the preservice teachers seemed to surface unevenly the multiple meanings that they attributed to play, and their beliefs about play seemed to be contradictory. In the following sections, I explore, in turn, the fluctuations and contradictions within the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play.

#### ***Fluctuations***

In this section, I use a second feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely that meaning is transitory and constantly changing (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991), to illustrate the unbounded quality of the preservice teachers’ beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Specifically, during the semester their beliefs about play seemed to fluctuate. In particular, the preservice teachers seemed to surface a belief about play then affirm, refine, add to, or change it over the course of our discussions. In some cases these fluctuations occurred between the interview at the beginning of the semester and the member checking session at the end of the semester. In other cases, however, these fluctuations occurred during the course of a single hour long discussion.

To illustrate how the preservice teachers' beliefs about play fluctuated, I present a mini-portrait of how one preservice teacher, Jane, surfaced her beliefs about what constitutes play. Then, building on this "descriptive base" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 29), I discuss two specific ways these particular beliefs seemed to fluctuate, namely (a) through surfacing new and refined meanings of play and (b) through an emphasis on certain meanings of play over others.

**Jane: Surfacing beliefs about what constitutes play.**

Initially, Jane described play as being child-determined and creative. When asked how she categorized an activity as play, she stated "I think of play as things that aren't necessarily structured or mapped out with detailed instructions—where the child has the opportunity to make it their own" (2007, Jane's interview). Jane's contrasting of *singing the ABC's* and *writing the ABC's*—which she categorized as play and not play respectively—illustrated how she believed that play allows for children to "make it their own."

I think writing the ABCs down leaves no room for creativity. It's either you have it right or you don't. Whereas singing the ABCs, you don't necessarily have to sing that song that we all know. You can sing the ABC's in a different tune. I've heard kids make up their own songs to go with the ABCs and you can just be original and there is not just one right answer (2007, Jane's interview).

Drawing on her previous experience with young children, Jane believed that singing the ABC's offered an opportunity for creativity that writing the ABC's did not. Presumably, because play is not structured for children they have the opportunity to create original works rather than produce standardized products.

During the categorization process itself and over the course of our conversation, Jane changed her categorization of certain activities. For instance, Jane initially categorized *science experiments*, an activity that she generated herself, as play; however, before we began discussing her categorized activities, Jane moved science experiments to the not play category. Curious about her decision, we had the following exchange:

**Me:** You moved science experiments from play to not play. What was your thinking when you moved it?

**Jane:** I still think that a science experiment a child gets to design on their own and do on their own would be play. But, the way I wrote it there was something like a teacher guided science experiment...do this, then do this, and watch what happens.

**Me:** So, it would kind of be in the middle?

**Jane:** Yeah.

**Me:** Would there be any other items that could be in the middle?

**Jane:** Art time could be in the middle. If the teacher tells you to cut out a square, glue it to the paper, and then cut out a triangle, and then glue it on top of the square...I don't think that's really play. But, if you are just at an art center with all of these materials and you can make whatever you want...I do think that is play. I guess actually beginning writing practice could be either one as well depending on the context. If a child is writing up a pretend grocery list for a game of house that they're playing, then that's included in play, but they would still be getting writing practice. Whereas, if the teacher gives them an activity, copy down the sentence, I don't think that is play (2007, Jane's interview).

Here, Jane's beliefs about which activities should be categorized as play seemed to evolve. Before we began discussing how she had categorized the activities, she seemed to change her perception of *science experiments*. When she initially wrote down the activity, she perceived the activity as being teacher-directed, stating, "the way I wrote it there [on the paper] was something like a teacher guided science experiment" (2007, Jane's interview). As she categorized the activities, however, her perception of *science experiments* seemed to change from a teacher directed activity to a child directed activity, which led her to categorize the activity as play. Then, after she finished categorizing the activities, she reverted back to her initial perception of the activity as teacher directed and moved the activity to the not play category. Because of how I had introduced the activity, Jane may have assumed that each activity had to fall into one category exclusively. When

I opened up the possibility of using a middle category, however, she decided to move *science experiments* one last time.

In addition to re-categorizing *science experiments*, during this exchange, Jane also re-categorized two other activities, *art time* and *beginning writing practice*, which she initially had categorized as play and not play respectively, to the middle category. As she described these activities she seemed to refine her earlier description of play as child-determined. Specifically, she moved from focusing on whether or not the teacher structured the activity to whether or not the teacher assigned the activity. For instance, she noted that if a child chose to write a grocery list in the house center that would be play, but if the teacher gave them a writing activity that would not be play.

Later, on her own, Jane chose to re-categorize two additional activities, *reading center* and *writing center*, moving them both from the not play category to the middle category. Explaining her thinking she stated:

**Jane:** ... Reading and writing [centers] I think can go into the middle because writing you can have a choice. It depends, if you're saying 'write me the steps in the cycle of water,' ... then I don't think that that is play. If you are saying 'you can write me a story,' just a fictional story of your own creation, that is more play because they are being able to use their minds to think, 'What do I write about? What do I want to include in my story?' Same with reading, [except for] textbook reading is not play.

**Me:** And, what kind of reading would fall into the play category?

**Jane:** Reading fiction, and maybe even biographies that are of interest to a certain child. Something that they do of their own accord I feel is play versus when it is assigned as work (2007, Jane's interview).

In terms of the reading center, Jane, seemed to believe that if a child chooses to engage in the activity it was play. That same activity, however, could become not play if the teacher required the child to engage in it. Although Jane's description of a reading center that is play aligned with this attribute, her description of a writing center that is play did not. Specifically, she described a writing center that is play as one in which the teacher asks a child to write a fictional story, thus suggesting that the activity is not voluntary. Here,

Jane seemed to emphasize another attribute that she ascribed to play, namely, that it is creative. Like Jane, the other six preservice teachers either moved activities from category to category, or described how an activity they placed in one category could fall into another. In this sense, play appeared to be transitory. That is, in one moment an activity might be considered play and in the next it might be considered middle or not play.

In addition to affirming and refining her description of play as being less child-determined and creative, Jane added to her initial description of play by describing it as affective, involving a broad range of emotions. She stated that during play children would:

...be feeling more emotions than in not play, because when you are in 'not play'... when you are learning math skills or something, it's not really emotional in any sort of way. It's just rote—going into your memory. Whereas if you're doing art you might be feeling sad so you draw a sad picture. You're feeling happy, so you draw a happy picture... a sun, a house... (2007, Jane's interview).

For Jane, *what* the child feels did not distinguish play from not play, rather it is *that* the child is feeling that distinguished play from not play. Specifically, Jane seemed to suggest that play acts as a medium through which children can express a range of emotions, from happiness to sadness.

Although Jane's beliefs about what constitutes play did not remain constant, among the seven preservice teachers, her beliefs fluctuated the least. Even within the relative stability of Jane's beliefs, however, I found multiple instances in which she affirmed, refined, added to, or changed her description of play. Thus, her portrait not only demonstrates the different types of fluctuations that I detected across the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, but (also) provides a baseline for them. In the next section, I present a more detailed discussion of how the preservice teachers added to and refined the meaning of play over the course of our discussions.



### **New and refined meanings of play.**

Over the course of our conversations, each of the preservice teachers seemed to describe the meaning of play, and then add to or refine it. For instance, as Jane's portrait illustrated, she initially described play as child-determined and creative, stating that "I think of play as things that aren't necessarily structured or mapped out with detailed instructions—where the child has the opportunity to make it their own" (2007, Jane's interview). Overtime, however, she refined her description of child-determined to include the notion that in addition to children structuring the activity they also choose to engage in the activity itself stating "something that they do of their own accord I feel is play versus when it is assigned as work" (2007, Jane's interview). In addition to refining how she described child-determined, Jane added to her description of play by describing it as affective, stating that during it children would "...be feeling more emotions than in not play, because when you are in 'not play' ... when you are learning math skills or something, it's not really emotional in any sort of way" (2007, Jane's interview). As Jane discussed play, she surfaced additional meanings of play and refined previous ones.

Like Jane, each of the six other preservice teachers added to or refined their descriptions of play over the course of our discussions. For instance, Lisa, like Jane, initially described play as child-determined and creative, stating that she categorized an activity as play if it "...was something that was a little less regulated and something where the kids can really kind of be creative. Not do whatever they want, but have a lot more space than a normal activity" (2007, Lisa's interview). Later, Lisa refined her description of child-determined to include the notion that children not only structure play activities they also choose to engage in them. For instance, when describing when puzzles would be play, Lisa stated that "...puzzles can be play when the kid chooses to do it where it's like a Dora the Explorer puzzle..." (2007, Lisa's interview).

Beyond refining her description of child-determined, Lisa added to her description of play by describing it as fun, as less serious, and as including particular types of play activities. Specifically, Lisa described children during play as feeling "...a little more free... they probably feel it [play] is more fun... a little less like school" (2007, Lisa's interview). And, she described the seven activities all seven preservice

teachers categorized as play— *Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*—as “more lighthearted” (2007, Lisa member-check).

In addition to adding new characteristics to her description of play, Lisa also added particular types of play to her definition. For instance, while describing three activities that she categorized as middle—*arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center, asking if you can have a turn on the swings, and telling a classmate they cannot join a board game already in progress*—she stated:

**Lisa:** ...arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center...I wouldn't say that arguing is play, but it obviously comes up while you're playing. So, if I was defining it [play], I don't think I would say that is play. Just like asking if you can have a turn on the swings... obviously if you're outside playing you're going to ask, but I wouldn't say the act of asking was playing.

**Me:** The swinging would be play?

**Lisa:** Yeah, same with telling a classmate that they can't join a board game that is already in progress. Again that is obviously going to come up in play, but I wouldn't say the act of saying it is play (2007, Lisa's interview).

Here, Lisa delineated between the activity—house center, swinging, and board games, which she believed were play—and the forms of communication that occur during them, which she believed were not play.

Thus, over the course of our discussions, Lisa refined and added to her description of play. Specifically, she moved from describing play as child-determined and creative to describing play as fun, less-serious, and as involving particular play activities. In addition, she seemed to refine the notion of child-determined from a focus on the child structuring the activity, to a focus on the child choosing the activity.

Like Jane and Lisa, the longer the preservice teachers and I discussed play, the more attributes of play they seemed to surface and refine. Vygotsky (1986) has suggested a symbiotic relationship between presenting one's ideas and the development of those ideas. He stated:

The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process, the relation of thought to word undergoes changes that themselves may be regarded as development in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem (p. 218). Thus, through our discussion of play, the preservice teachers may not only have been describing their beliefs about play, but (also) developing them.

In line with Vygotsky, two of the preservice teachers in this study cited the interview process itself as shaping their beliefs about play. For instance, Kate stated that “...having to verbalize my own opinions really makes me second guess myself” (2007, Kate’s member-check). And, Mary stated that, “Each one of us continuously were developing our values and opinions throughout those interviews” (2007, Mary, member-check email). Thus, as they discussed play, the preservice teachers may have been fleshing out their beliefs and in so doing refined and added to those beliefs as our conversations progressed.

#### **Emphasizing certain meanings of play.**

As the preservice teachers surfaced new and refined meanings for play, they seemed to emphasize certain meanings of play over others through: (a) *a temporary emphasis*, demonstrated by the preservice teachers’ movement of activities from one category to another and by their use of the middle category and (b) *a continued emphasis*, demonstrated by their consistent affirmation of certain meanings of play over others. In terms of a temporary emphasis, Jane’s decision to move *science experiments* from play to not play to middle demonstrated how temporarily emphasizing certain attributes led her to change the categorization of this activity and to utilize the middle category. For instance, Jane initially categorized *science experiments*, an activity that she generated herself, as play; however, before we began discussing the categories, Jane moved science experiments to the not play category. In discussing her decision Jane described how her

evolving emphasis on whether or not the activity was child-determined or teacher-determined led her to move the activity from one category to another.

The evolving emphasis Rose placed on *fun* as an attribute of play provides a second instance of how temporarily emphasizing certain attributes led to changes in categorizations of particular activities and to a decision to use the middle category. Specifically, during our conversations, Rose seemed to grapple with whether or not *fun* was an attribute of play. For instance, in describing how children think, act, and feel during play, she seemed to believe that play involved both positive and negative affect. She stated:

**Rose:** I think in elementary school you're definitely aware of when you have your time to yourself. So, it's kind of like "What am I going to do with this time!?" [stated in an enthusiastic voice]...[For instance,] at recess you have that amount of time to do whatever you want and play your usual recess game that you play every day and "Yeah! It's finally time for that!"

**Me:** How might they feel during those times?

**Rose:** ...not weighted down with the thought of school...or, maybe really worried about who they are going to play with...

Here, Rose described play as both fun and challenging. When she was categorizing activities on her lists, however, she seemed to view play primarily as fun. For instance, Rose initially chose to categorize *arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center* and *figuring out how to join a group that's already busy with an activity*, as not play because they were not fun, however, she was uncertain about her decision, an issue she raised once I indicated that she could create and use a middle category:

**Rose:** There were a few I wasn't sure if I wanted to say if they were play...

**Me:** Which were they?

**Rose:** Well, I wasn't sure if I wanted to say these were play... *arguing about who gets to be the baby* and *figuring out how to join a group already busy with an activity*...because just the figuring out how to join a group seems like it would be very stressful and sad and not something that you look forward to in the day's activities. So, you wouldn't approach it as play, you would approach it as

something very difficult and emotional and not fun. So, as the child, even though it's designated playtime it's not fun and play. And I guess the arguing would have started out as play, but would also be something that's not fun or desirable (2007, Rose's interview).

Although she believed the activities themselves—house center and a group activity—were play, her belief that the communication that occurred during them was not fun led her to categorize them as not play. Here, fun seemed to play a central role in her decision to categorize an activity as play or not play. Once I indicated that she could utilize the middle category, however, Rose moved these activities, suggesting that she had lessened her emphasis on fun and now gave equal weight to whether or not the activity was fun and to the form of the activity itself.

Later in the semester, Rose again seemed to question the centrality of fun to her description of play. During our member-checking session, she decided to move the same two activities, ... *arguing about who gets to be the baby* and *figuring out how to join a group already busy with an activity*, from the middle category to the play category. When I asked to her explain her thinking, she stated:

I remember having those under middle because they were definitely not enjoyable experiences. But, neither would 51 [*while pretending to play school the pretend teacher calls the pretend student 'stupid' and the student begins to cry—an activity she categorized as play*] and 52 [*telling a classmate they cannot join a board game already in progress—an activity she categorized as play*]. So, I guess I kind of wrapped those all together because they are a part of play, even though they aren't enjoyable. So, those are play, even though they are not enjoyable (2007, Rose's interview).

Perhaps recognizing a potential inconsistency in her beliefs, Rose moved the two activities to align with other “not fun” activities that she had categorized as play. Although Rose may have originally believed that play should be fun, over time it seemed to have a more tangential role in her definition of play which in turn affected how she categorized these particular activities.

The preservice teachers' ability to place one activity into multiple categories and to use the middle category itself seemed to reflect the Vygotskian (1986) notion of *participation*, which suggests that individuals thinking in complexes may place a construct into more than one group depending on which attribute they emphasize from one moment to the next. This may also reflect the affective and evaluative influences on their beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Specifically, changes in the preservice teachers' feelings about a particular activity may have influenced them to change categorizations of particular activities. Perhaps to reconcile the evolving emphasis that they placed on certain meanings over others, the preservice teachers physically moved activities from one category to another and/or utilized the middle category. While moving activities from one category to another visually demonstrated participation, that is placing a construct into multiple categories, the middle category itself seemed to embody participation. That is, activities placed in the middle category, were neither exclusively play nor exclusively not play; rather, they could be play in one context and not play in another or they could simultaneously incorporate attributes of play and not play.

In addition to placing a temporary emphasis on certain meanings of play, the preservice teachers also seemed to place a continued emphasis on certain meanings of play by describing them as attributes of play multiple times. For instance, although Jane described play as child-determined, affective, and creative, she seemed to emphasize creativity as an attribute of play. A case in point, Jane twice described creativity as a general attribute of play stating that , if an activity "...is left open to a child's creativity then it is play" (2007, Jane's interview) and that play is "...where the child has the opportunity to make it their own" (2007, Jane's interview). In addition to describing *play* as creative, she also described specific play activities as creative. For instance, when describing why *singing the ABC's* was play and *writing the ABC's* was not play she stated:

I think writing the ABCs down leaves no room for creativity. It's either you have it right or you don't. Whereas singing the ABCs, you don't necessarily have to sing that song that we all know. You can sing the ABC's in a different tune. I've

heard kids make up their own songs to go with the ABCs and you can just be original and there is not just one right answer (2007, Jane's interview). Similarly, she described a writing center where children could write and "mail" each other letters as play "because kids are folding notes, writing things, whatever they want in it and that's creative" (2007, Jane's member-check). Thus, over the data collection process Jane placed a continued emphasis on creativity as an attribute of play.

Joan's emphasis on fun as an attribute of play, a term that she used 72 times during our interview, provided a second example of how the preservice teachers seemed to emphasize certain meanings of play by using them multiple times over the data collection process. In describing how children think, act, and feel during play, she stated, "They're having fun. They're enjoying time with others" (2007, Joan's interview). In addition, she often used fun either alone or in conjunction with another attribute to describe play and play activities. For instance, Joan combined fun with imagination, creativity, and pretend when describing the house center and dress-up clothes stating, "I chose house center [for play], because it's imaginative, it's creative, it's fun" and "Dress up clothes, again can be just pretend, you're a different person, you can just have fun" (2007, Joan's interview). Similarly, she used "imagination and fun" (2007, Joan's member-check) to describe the seven activities all seven preservice teachers categorized as play—*Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*. Although Joan used a total of 12 attributes to describe play including that play is fun, child-determined, creative/imaginative, relaxing, positive, socially interactive, physically active, not driven by classroom rules, process oriented; play is a game or pretend; and play occurs outside; she continuously emphasized, one attribute, fun, as a characteristic of play.

Vygotsky (1986) has suggested that individuals thinking in complexes may begin "to single out elements" (p. 135) that can be used for abstraction, a central feature of the final phase of his continuum, *concepts*. Therefore, the preservice teachers' continued emphasis on certain meanings of play suggested that they might have been "paying attention to some traits of an object over others—giving them preferential treatment, so to speak" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 136). This continued emphasis may also reflect the affective

and evaluative influences on their beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Specifically, perhaps because certain meanings of play resonated with each preservice teacher more than others, they cited those meanings more often when describing their beliefs about what constitutes play.

Thus, the fluctuations in the preservice teachers' beliefs demonstrated they were unbounded, that is, loosely-structured and not well defined (Nespor, 1987). Specifically, it seemed that in one moment an activity might be considered play and in the next it might be considered middle or not play. Thus, as Krasnor and Pepler (1980) suggested in their review of literature, "play is not considered an 'all or none' phenomenon" (p. 88); rather for the preservice teachers play represented a continuum of attributes whose meaning changed based on the emphasis they placed on particular attributes.

The fluctuations in the preservice teachers' beliefs not only demonstrated the unbounded quality of their beliefs, they also provide a different lens for examining changes in preservice teachers' beliefs. Specifically, longitudinal research conducted over several years from preservice to inservice has been described as yielding the richest findings on changes in beliefs (Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998); however, the fluctuations in the preservice teachers' beliefs, namely that they added to, refined, affirmed and changed how they defined play, suggests that preservice teachers' beliefs about play may be in a constant state of motion. Thus, instead of examining how a particular belief is altered from one time period, such as the beginning of the semester, to the next, such as at the end of the semester, Vygotsky's (1986) work also allows us to think about changes in beliefs as constantly occurring within a smaller timeframe.

#### **Summary: Fluctuations.**

In this section, I explored the loosely-structured quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play by describing the uneven manner in which they surfaced their beliefs. Specifically, the preservice teachers seemed to add to, refine, affirm and change their beliefs about what constitutes play over the course of our discussions. Similar to how they surfaced these beliefs, the preservice teachers seemed to surface unevenly all of their beliefs about play. Thus, regardless of the focus of our discussion—describing play, its



functions, the teacher's role in it, or its role in the early childhood classroom—the preservice teachers would make a statement about play and then affirm, refine, add to, or change it. These fluctuations not only led the preservice teachers to surface multiple beliefs about different aspects of play, it also led them to express contradictory beliefs about play. In the next section, I discuss these contradictions.

### *Contradictions*

A third feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely that they are contradictory, further illustrates the unbounded quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Specifically, Vygotsky suggested that for individuals thinking in complexes a word may “have different or even opposite meanings” (p. 125). In line with complexes, all seven preservice teachers surfaced contradictory beliefs about play, its functions, the teacher's role in it, and its role in the early childhood classroom.

Although each of the seven preservice teachers had individualized beliefs about play; some overlap existed among the contradictory beliefs that they surfaced, namely that (a) play is child-determined and teacher controlled; (b) play is enjoyable and unpleasant, and (c) play is valuable and unessential. In this section, I focus on the contradictions that I detected across the majority of the preservice teachers' beliefs. After providing an overview of the contradictions within the preservice teachers' beliefs, I discuss them.

#### **Play is child-determined and teacher-controlled.**

All seven preservice teachers described play as being child-determined. Specifically, they seemed to believe that who controlled the activity, the child or the teacher, characterized play. Although the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play had few external constraints, each of them also described how, as the teacher, they would control play and play activities. After describing how the preservice teachers characterized play as child-determined, I present data demonstrating that the preservice teachers also seemed to believe that play was teacher-controlled.

Associated with the romantic notions of freedom emphasized by Rousseau (Boyd, 1962) and Froebel (1902), play is often characterized as child-determined (Bennett et al., 1997; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Garvey, 1990; Howard et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; King, 1979; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Like teachers and researchers, the preservice teachers in this study also seemed to believe that children, and not teachers, choose to engage in and determine how to structure play. For instance, Rose's description of the difference between the *art center*, an activity she categorized as play, and *drawing a picture in art class*, an activity that she categorized as not play, demonstrates how the child guides play activities:

...[Play is] something where they get to make their own decisions... art center I highlighted, but I think drawing a picture, I had to think about it more. Because, in an art center I pictured just a lot of options and you can pick and choose what you do. But, in drawing a picture, I figured it was more dictated by the art teacher with everything laid out for what you were supposed to do (2007, Rose's interview).

Thus, Rose considered the *art center* play because it was not controlled by the teacher. Instead children could choose which materials they would use and how they would use them. In contrast, she considered *drawing a picture in art class* not play because the teacher would determine how to approach the project and what the final product would be.

Joan's description of why she categorized *playing musical instruments in music class* and *drawing pictures in art* as middle provides a second instance of how the preservice teachers described play as child-determined. She stated, "I think it is fun to play music and do art, but it's also dictated what you're supposed to play and what you're supposed to draw" (2007, Joan's interview). Although Joan believed this activity was fun, a characteristic she attributed to play, she did not believe that these activities were exclusively play because the teacher and not the child would structure them.

Supporting their belief that play is child-determined all seven preservice teachers suggested that one of the roles for teachers during play is to not directly intervene in it. Specifically, the preservice teachers suggested that during play teachers could (a) observe

and learn about the children in their classroom and/or (b) separate from the children so that they, the teachers, could have a break or tend to other classroom duties. First, all seven preservice teachers suggested that observing children was one role for the teacher during play. For instance, Jane noted that during play teachers would be:

Thinking and I guess noticing that the children's different personalities come out more in play. And teachers can and should take that information over to the not play side and help them [the children] learn things in a way that they like to (2007, Jane's interview).

Similarly, Rose stated that during play teachers would be "seeing what they can learn about their students while they are playing ... (2007, Rose's interview) and what they "can learn about their students' personalities from their way of playing" (2007, Rose's IIECE). Because play is not determined by the teacher, the preservice teachers believed that during play the teacher had an opportunity to observe her students and to enhance her understanding of them. The notion that teachers should observe and not intervene in children's play aligns with the hands-off approach to incorporating play in the early childhood classroom (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). Here, adults are discouraged from directly participating in play and instead, encouraged to use play as an observational tool to better understand children (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Also supporting the notion that play is child-determined, four of the preservice teachers suggested that during play teachers separate from children and take a break or tend to other classroom duties. For instance, in describing how teachers think, act, and feel during play, Joan stated that play is "...a break for the teacher too. Except then they're actually teaching. In the practicum, [the children]...are also out of their hair while they're trying to work with this other group (2007, Joan's interview). In addition, Kate noted that during play teachers "...tend to separate and do their own work while the students are playing" (2007, Kate's interview). Perhaps because play is child-determined, the teacher has time to directly involve herself in activities where adult intervention is needed, such as in small group instruction and to complete other work that needs her attention. The notion that teachers are uninvolved in play aligns with the non-play approach in which work and play are dichotomized (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Although these two teaching roles, namely acting as an observer or separating oneself from children's play represent two different approaches to addressing play in the classroom, they share a common element. Specifically, both teachers' roles support the notion that play is child-determined.

Contradicting the preservice teachers' description of play as child-determined, each of them also described how the teacher controls different aspects of classroom play. Specifically, they indicated that they would exclude certain forms of play from their future classrooms and they suggested two teaching roles that involved direct intervention in children's play. In terms of the former, each of the preservice teachers indicated that they would limit or exclude certain forms of play from their classrooms. For instance, although all seven preservice teachers indicated that they would include a majority of the activities that they had categorized as play in their future classroom ( $M=86%$ ,  $Mdn=88%$ ,  $range=75%$  to  $92%$ ), their decision to exclude even a minimal number of play activities suggested that they would control play in their classrooms. In this regard, play is not entirely child-determined because the teacher limits the types of play activities children can engage in.

Although there was not universal agreement among the preservice teachers in terms of the play activities that they wanted to exclude from their future classrooms, certain play activities were excluded by multiple preservice teachers. For instance, five of the preservice teachers excluded *pretending to be a character from a violent rated-R movie* and/or *while pretending to play school, the pretend teacher calls the pretend student 'stupid' and the student begins to cry*; three of the preservice teachers excluded *telling a classmate that they cannot enjoy a board game already in progress*; and two of the preservice teachers excluded *participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another*. In these instances, the preservice teachers seemed to exclude these particular activities based on their personal preferences or on their idealized notions of play. In terms of personal preferences, Nespor (1987) has suggested that feelings guide beliefs. Accordingly, Sue suggested that she excluded *pretending to be a character from a violent rated-R movie* because "I don't see any good in that so I could do without it" (2007, Sue's interview) while Mary suggested that she would exclude

*pretending to be a character from a violent rated-R movie and participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another* because, "...I don't think I like the whole cops and robbers thing. I think we'll have no shooting, hitting, or acting out violent things. I think we can pretend to be better things" (2007, Mary's interview). In both cases, the preservice teachers excluded these activities based on their personal preferences, that is, because they did not like the activities themselves.

In other instances, the preservice teachers seemed to exclude activities based on their idealized notions of play. Specifically, some of the preservice teachers could envision children choosing to engage in these activities, but the preservice teachers did not feel they were ideal. Nespor (1987) suggested that ideals, which he referred to as *alternativity*, reflect a person's conception of an optimum situation (e.g. how a person would like a situation to be), and guide their beliefs. For instance, with the following activities—*the pretend teacher calls the pretend student 'stupid' and the student begins to cry and telling a classmate that they cannot join a board game already in progress*—Lisa stated that "...obviously I don't want that in the classroom... [because] hopefully, my ideal perfect students they would all love each other. They would never say anything mean to each other ever" (2007, Lisa's interview). Similarly, Rose stated that with the following activities—*pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie; participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another; while pretending to play school, the pretend teacher calls the pretend student 'stupid' and the student begins to cry*—she could see children engaging in them, but that in an "ideal world... [she] wouldn't even want them talking about it at all" (2007, Rose's interview). In these instances, the preservice teachers seemed to exclude activities because they did not fit their ideal image of activities children should engage in. Thus, by excluding certain forms of play, the preservice teachers seemed to contradict their assertion that play is child-determined by suggesting that the teacher controls which activities the children engage in.

In addition to controlling the types of play children might engage in, other teaching roles surfaced by the preservice teachers, such as directly intervening to mediate or to enhance play, seemed to suggest that play is not entirely child-determined. In terms

of acting as a mediator, six of the preservice teachers suggested that a teacher may need to directly intervene in play to protect children when unsafe or difficult peer situations arise. As Jane noted, she wanted “to ensure the safety” of her students during play (2007, Jane’s IIECE). Similarly, Rose described how during play the teacher would be “watching to make sure that it’s safe and looking out for bullies, or looking out for kids who are being left out or, looking for discipline problems” (2007, Rose’s interview). Additionally, Joan stated that children might have discipline problems during play that would require teacher intervention. Discussing how a teacher needs to look out for a child’s safety, she stated that during outdoor play:

...Sometimes you're worried ‘Is this kid going to get hurt?’ And, if [children are] throwing rocks [they] have to be disciplined... [the teacher has] to watch out for emotional and physical safety... You need to protect your students (2007, Joan’s interview).

Suggesting that teachers mediate play seemed to counter the notion that play is child-determined. In these instances, even if children wanted to engage in unsafe or hurtful play, the teacher would stop them from doing so.

Beyond intervening in dangerous play, the preservice teachers described intervening in low quality play. For instance, four of the preservice teachers approved of a teaching scenario in which a teacher intervened to enhance “low quality” pretend play (see *narrowly focused intervention*, Trawick-Smith, 2005, p. 221). For instance, Jane, who described this scenario as most reflective of her future teaching practice, suggested that “there are two kids that could be engaged in rich meaningful play but they’re missing the last link and the teacher provided that I think. And, I think that is really important” (2007, Jane’s member check). Rose, taking a similar position, stated that, “... the teacher took the initiative to enhance their play and the children responded well to it and it served that purpose” (2007, Rose’s member check). These preservice teachers’ beliefs that teachers should intervene in low quality play also seemed to contradict their beliefs that play is child-determined. In these instances, even if children wanted to engage in “low quality” play, the teacher would not allow them to do so. Taken together, these two teaching roles suggested by the preservice teachers, namely acting as a mediator or

intervening in low quality, align with the narrowly-focused intervention approach which suggests that the teacher becomes involved in play only when necessary (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008) and they both limit the extent to which play can be child-determined.

The preservice teachers' contradictory belief that play is child-determined and teacher-controlled highlights the challenge of enacting romantic notions of play in an early childhood classroom (Ailwood, 2003; Burman, 2008, Cannella, 2002). Described by Cannella (2002) as the "illusion" of choice (p. 122), children cannot freely choose their own pursuits in an authoritarian context. Instead, because of the contextual constraints of classroom settings, teachers can only offer a bounded set of options from which children can choose (Cannella, 2002). Thus, although the preservice teachers believe that play is child-determined, by intimating that the teacher limits play activities and intervenes directly in dangerous or low quality play, they also seem to believe that it is teacher-controlled.

**Play is enjoyable and unpleasant.**

Six of the preservice teachers described enjoyment as either a characteristic and/or benefit of play. Although these preservice teachers seemed to believe that play is fun, they each described situations when play might not be enjoyable for children. After describing how the preservice teachers described play as fun, I present data demonstrating that the preservice teachers also seemed to believe that play could be unpleasant.

Similar to the notion that play is child-determined, the characterization of play as fun is deeply rooted in play discourse (Ailwood, 2003; Cannella, 2002). Describing his ideal image of a young boy engaged in play, Rousseau (1962) suggested that in play the child "goes into everything he does with pleasing interest" and Froebel (1902) characterized play as giving children "joy" (1902, p. 55). Over two hundred years later, the perspective of play as pleasurable endured for six of the preservice teachers in this study who suggested fun as either a characteristic and/or a function of play. For instance, Lisa used fun as both a characteristic and outcome of play. She stated that during play children "probably feel it is more fun and a little less like school" (2007, Lisa's

interview) and she described one of the benefits of dress-up clothes, a play activity, as “...fun because you can imagine and things like that. [And] it’s kind of fun when you can put on a hat or something and become a character” (2007, Lisa’s interview). Like Lisa, Kate also used fun as a characteristic and outcome of play. For instance, she described play as “fun itself because sometimes school work is really not” (2007, Kate’s member-check) and she used “fun” when describing the benefits of play (2007, Kate’s IIECE) and of a particular play activity, the *water and sand table* (2007, Kate’s member check). For both Lisa and Kate, enjoyment was not only a characteristic of, but (also) a byproduct of play.

Like Kate and Lisa, Joan and Sue also emphasized fun as a characteristic and function of play. Joan, who used the term fun 72 times during our hour long interview, believed that during play children are “having fun. They’re enjoying time with others” (2007, Joan’s interview), and she used fun either alone or in conjunction with another attribute to describe play and multiple play activities. For instance, she described the seven activities all seven preservice teachers categorized as play—*Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*—as involving “imagination and fun” (2007, Joan’s member-check). Similarly, Sue also emphasized fun as a characteristic and function of play stating that whether or not an activity is play “depends on what the individual finds would be fun,” but also suggesting that during play children “...would be having fun” (2007, Sue’s interview). Furthermore, she believed that one function of play is that “it lets kids look forward to something, to be excited to go to school. It’s fun” (2007, Sue’s interview). Thus, the majority of the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play is inherently enjoyable and/or produces positive affect.

Even though the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play is fun, they also described instances in which play might be unpleasant. Specifically, they categorized potentially unpleasant activities as play and/or they suggested that one of the teacher’s roles in play is to mediate conflict. First, in terms of categorizing potentially unpleasant activities as play, three of the preservice teachers categorized certain situations that might promote negative affect in children—*arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house*



*center; while pretending to play school, the pretend teacher calls the pretend student “stupid” and the student begins to cry; and telling a classmate that they cannot join a board game that is already in progress—as play.* Doing so suggested that at times play may involve negative emotions. Kate, perhaps recognizing this inconsistency, described why she would incorporate two of these activities—*arguing about who gets to be the baby and telling a classmate they cannot join a board game already in progress*—into her own early childhood classroom.

While I consider them negative, I think that they help you develop certain skills. Like arguing, you have to give in sometimes. And, sometimes you have to stand up for yourself. And, I think that’s something that they can learn through that. And, telling a classmate that they cannot join a board game, to tell a student not to play seems like the opposite of what you’d want to do. But, I think learning that kind of disappointment, learning that you can’t just jump in if someone has already begun, I think that that’s a vital lesson. I think that makes sense (2007, Kate’s interview).

Even though Kate had characterized play as “fun” (2007, Kate’s member check), in these instances play did not appear to be fun. Rather, these activities seemed to cause negative feelings.

Second, beyond categorizing potentially unpleasant activities as play, the suggestion that one of the teacher’s roles in play is to mediate conflict, made by five of the six preservice teachers who characterized play as fun, also seemed to indicate that at times play might be unpleasant. For instance, Mary, who had described “fun” as a benefit of two play activities, *the water and sand table and board games*, also stated that conflict might occur during play. Describing the teacher’s role in play, she stated “...chances are during play conflicts will arise. Therefore, I will have to play the role of the careful and fair mediator during the students’ play” (2007, Mary’s IIECE). Similarly, Joan, who also described play as “fun,” stated that during play “you [the teacher] have to watch out for safety... emotional and physical safety” (2007, Joan’s interview). On the one hand, the notion that teachers mediate conflict during play might seem to support the preservice teachers’ characterization of play as fun. That is, by mediating conflict the teacher can

assist children in resolving their problems so that they can return to enjoying their play. However, the fact that problems arise at all during play indicates that at times play might not be enjoyable for children.

Ailwood (2003) has posited that characterizing play as fun may be rooted in adults' "nostalgic vision" of play from their childhood and not in the reality of play and play activities (p. 292). That is, as adults we remember play as being fun regardless of whether or not it was. And in so doing, adults ignore "the coercive, cruel and dangerous aspects of many forms of play" (Burman, 2008, p. 265). While adults may not remember these more challenging aspects of play, children seem to because they have not been found to define play as "fun;" but rather, child-determined and/or socially interactive (Howard et al., 2006; King, 1979). Thus, although the preservice teachers believe that play is fun, by categorizing unpleasant activities as play and/or by intimating that one of the teacher's roles in play is to mediate conflict, they also seem to believe that play is unpleasant.

**Play is valuable and unessential.**

A final contradictory belief held by all seven preservice teachers was that play is valuable but not essential. Specifically, the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play encourages multiple forms of learning and development and should be included in early childhood classrooms. However, they also seemed to believe that play is inferior to not play which evidenced itself in the different ways they described the role of learning and development in play and not play, the teacher's role in play and not play, the purposes of play and not play, and the role of play and not play in the early childhood classroom. After describing how the preservice teachers seemed to value play, I describe how they also seemed to believe that it was unessential.

The notion that play is valuable is also deeply embedded in play discourse (Ailwood, 2003). For instance, early childhood educational organizations, teachers, and educational researchers have described the importance of and need for play in young children's lives and education (Bennett et al. 1997; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Moon & Reifel, 2008). Advocates of play

vocally defend its inclusion in early childhood education and express their concern over perceived limitations of play in the classroom. Statements like “Children’s play has come under renewed attack” (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006, p.15) and “Children’s play—their inborn disposition for curiosity, imagination, and fantasy—is being silenced” (Elkind, 2007, ix), demonstrate their uneasiness with these perceived trends.

In line with the notion that play has value, all seven preservice teachers believed that play should be included in early childhood classrooms. In their *Initial Ideas about Early Childhood Education* assignment, when asked if students would be allowed/encouraged to play in their future early childhood classrooms, each of the preservice teachers indicated that they would include play. For instance, Mary wrote “Of course, I will allow/encourage my students to play in my classroom!” (2007, Mary’s IIECE) and Jane wrote “I will definitely encourage play in my primary classroom” (2007, Jane’s IIECE). In addition to their affirmative responses to whether or not they would include play in their future classrooms, during our interview each preservice teacher suggested that she would include multiple play activities in her classroom. Specifically, the preservice teachers indicated that they would include a majority of activities that they had categorized as play ( $M=86\%$ ,  $Mdn=88\%$ ,  $range=75\%$  to  $92\%$ ).

In addition to believing that play should be included in the classroom, the preservice teachers’ collective suggestion that play encourages multiple forms of learning and development also suggested that they believe it has value for young children. Table 4 demonstrates the types of learning and development that the preservice teachers associated with play. The first column lists the five broader categories that I identified across the preservice teachers’ responses, namely (a) *social/emotional*, (b) *cognitive*, (c) *physical*, (d) *communication*, and (e) *cultural*; and the 14 specific types of learning and development that I identified as falling within these categories. The second column lists the number of preservice teachers whose response fell into a particular category/type and the third column lists those preservice teachers’ names. For consistency, the preservice teachers’ names are listed in the following order: Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary and Kate. In the fourth column, I have presented examples of the preservice teachers’ descriptions of the different types of learning and development that they believe play

encourages. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather brief illustrations of the different types of learning that they described.

Table 4: Learning and Development Encouraged by Play

Categories	No.	List of preservice teachers	Examples
<b>Social/Emotional</b>	<b>n=7</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate</b>	
Learning to work with others	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	<p>“They’re learning, they’re developing their social skills. [They’re] learning how to work together with others, figuring out what we’re going to do and why we’re going to do it and joining in and learning to play in groups and being including of others” (2007, Joan’s Interview).</p> <p>In play, children are “...learning how to interact with their peers, learning how to deal with different situations that come up... like in the dramatic play area. Like <i>arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center</i>, learning how to deal with problems like that effectively” (2007, Jane’s interview).</p>
Learning about competition	n=3	Lisa, Mary, Kate	With traditional board games, “...you have to learn that even if you’re rolling the dice just like everybody else is rolling the dice, you may fall behind, you may not win. I think that losing is kind of a big thing to learn” (2007, Kate’s interview)
Learning about oneself	n=3	Rose, Mary, Kate	“They could learn a lot about themselves or maybe about their artistic talent or, athletic ability” (2007, Rose’s interview).
Learning how to master anxieties	n=2	Jane, Mary	With playing hospital, children are “...mastering their anxieties over medical encounters” (2007, Mary’s member-check)
Learning empathy	n=1	Jane	Dress-up clothes “allow them to see how it is to be someone else which would encourage empathy in later life” (2007, Jane’s interview).
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>n=7</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate</b>	
Learning academic concepts	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	<p>“The water and sand table, I’m sure that it teaches basic scientific values. Probably, it’s learning what floats and what doesn’t. Basic things like that” (2007, Lisa’s member-check).</p> <p>“With <i>Chutes and Ladders</i> [they’re learning] addition” (2007 Sue’s interview).</p>
Thinking creatively/imaginatively	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	<p>Art “...allows for the half of the brain that deals with creativity and artistic expression [to develop]” (2007, Mary’s member-check).</p> <p>Pretending “...it spurs so much creativity” (2007, Kate’s interview).</p>

Developing general cognitive skills	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	“I believe play is integral to the expansion of young minds, it allows children to raise questions of their own” (2007, Jane’s IIECE). “Play serves to make learning a personal experience for the children in order to further develop and cement ideas in their minds”(2007, Rose IIECE).
Learning to follow rules	n=6	Lisa, Jane, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	During tag, they’re learning to “follow the rules of the game” (2007, Lisa’s Interview).
Memorizing	n=2	Joan, Kate	With literacy games “the rhyming words, letters, I think that they learn how to train their own memory. I think by following the teacher’s example of mnemonic devices... being that kind of idea that they can learn for themselves what helps them to remember” (2007, Kate’s interview).
<b>Physical</b>	<b>n=6</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Mary, Kate</b>	
Learning fine motor skills	n=5	<b>Jane, Sue, Rose, Mary, Kate</b>	With activities for holidays... “they learn how to cut things and they learn hand eye coordination” (2007, Sue’s interview).
Learning gross motor skills	n=3	<b>Lisa, Mary, Kate</b>	During kickball, they learn “...physical coordination” (2007, Kate’s interview).
<b>Communication</b>	<b>n=4</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Mary, Kate</b>	
Speaking Skills	n=4	Lisa, Jane, Mary, Kate	During tag... “the person who’s supposed to tag they have to diplomatically debate who that’s going to be. Usually the teacher is not going to say, ‘You have to be it.’ So, they’re learning communication skills, and debating skills” (2007, Mary’s interview).
<b>Cultural</b>	<b>n=3</b>	<b>Jane, Sue, Mary</b>	
Learning about gender/family roles	n=3	Jane, Sue, Mary	During the house center, children can learn “...gender roles and things like that. You realize that girls are supposed to like flowers and boys are supposed to like monster trucks. And, the house center teaches you those things” (2007, Sue’s interview).

As Table 4 illustrates, the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play encourages multiple types of learning and development, including social/emotional, cognitive, physical, and to a lesser extent communicative and cultural development; these domains are often cited in play literature as outcomes of play (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005). For instance, similar to the preservice teachers, the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) statement suggests that “in addition to supporting cognitive development, play serves important functions in children’s physical, emotional, and social development” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 14). Positioning play in this fashion, namely as a vehicle for children’s learning and development, has been described by Sutton-Smith (1997) as the *Rhetoric of Progress*. This “persuasive discourse” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 51) has dominated the field of early childhood education over the past

century and has been criticized for simplifying children by assuming a universal form of development (Cannella, 2002), and by placing play into a “social and contextual vacuum” (Ailwood, 2003, p. 290). In line with these concerns, the learning the preservice teachers associated with play did not seem connected to the child’s social-cultural context, but rather, play itself. For instance, Kate stated that with the *water and sand table* children learn “...about consistency. They are learning wet versus dry, mud versus sand” (2007, Kate’s interview) and Sue stated that “with *Chutes and Ladders* [they’re learning] addition” (2007, Sue’s interview). In both of these statements the learning, namely the learning of academic concepts, is tied to the activity itself. In these instances the preservice teacher did not address whether and how a child’s culture might intersect and influence his/her learning during these activities; rather, they suggested that the activity alone encouraged learning and development regardless of the context.

The one exception to connecting play and culture came from two preservice teachers who suggested that children learn about gender and family roles from play. For instance, Mary briefly stated that children learn “societal gender roles” (2007, Mary IIECE) from play while Sue stated that during the house center, children can learn “...gender roles and things like that. You realize that girls are supposed to like flowers and boys are supposed to like monster trucks. And, the house center teaches you those things” (2007, Sue’s interview). Because gender can be influenced by culture (Frost et al., 2005, 2008), ostensibly these two preservice teachers seemed to believe that children learn about their culture through play. However, “societal gender roles” and the notion that girls should like flowers and boys should like trucks, suggests that these two preservice teachers may believe that children are learning how to perform “their gender correctly” through play (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2004, p. 419). Thus, their beliefs seem to reify and not to interrupt dominant notions of how boys and girls should act.

Although the preservice teachers seemed to believe that play is valuable, namely that it encourages multiple forms of learning and development and should be included in early childhood classrooms, they also seemed to believe that it is unessential. This evidenced itself in the different ways they described the purposes of play and not play, the teacher’s role in play and not play, and the role of play and not play in the early

childhood classroom. In terms of learning and development, like play, the preservice teachers also believed that not play encourages multiple forms of each. Table 5 demonstrates the types of learning and development that the preservice teachers associated with not play. The first column lists the four broader categories that I identified across the preservice teachers' responses, namely (a) *cognitive*, (b) *social/emotional*; (c) *physical*, and (d) *communication*; and the nine specific forms of learning and development that I identified as falling within these categories. The second column lists the number of preservice teachers whose responses fell into a particular category/type and the third column lists those preservice teachers' names. For consistency, the preservice teachers' names are listed in the following order: Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary and Kate. In the fourth column, I have presented examples of the preservice teachers' descriptions of the different types of learning and development that they believed not play encourages. These examples are not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather brief illustrations of the different types of learning that they described.

Table 5: Learning and Development Encouraged by Not Play

Categories	No.	List of preservice teachers	Examples
<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>n=7</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate</b>	
Learning academic concepts	n=7	Lisa, Jane, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary, Kate	They'd be learning "skills to get them ready for the real world like making an alphabet, reading and writing ... And, you know math can be useful... it is useful in many life skills. Just the basic things, like being able to figure out how much something costs and if you have enough money for it" (2007, Jane's Interview)  "They'd be learning a lot of the base stuff. So, learning their letters, their sight words, their counting, different base things. So, it seems like there would be a lot of repetition. But, just really getting those things down" (2007, Rose's interview).
Learning through direct instruction	n=3	Lisa, Sue, Mary	"They're learning the things that maybe a kid might not learn if you leave him alone to figure things out" (2007, Lisa's Interview).  In not play "...the teacher, has to start it [the learning, and]...the benefits are they are going to continuously learn something new (2007, Mary's interview)

Thinking creatively/ imaginatively	n=3	Joan, Sue, Mary	"In listening to a book on tape it's just like reading—they're thinking, they're using their imaginations because they have to create the stories in their mind because there aren't pictures in front of them" (2007, Mary, member-check).
Memorizing	n=3	Jane, Joan, Kate	With writing the ABC's, the children are "memorizing the alphabet" (2007, Jane's member-check).
<b>Social/Emotional</b>	<b>n=6</b>	<b>Lisa, Sue, Rose, Joan, Kate, Mary</b>	
Learning life/school skills	n=5	Lisa, Sue, Rose, Joan, Mary	With "zipping up your jacket, [they're] learning how to keep warm" (2007, Sue's member-check).  "Asking for help, I think that's very important. I think that asking for help gives people the opportunity to really feel if they can't do it themselves there's always somebody else that can help them. Following directions, I think that following directions you have to have for the rest of your life. If you can't follow directions, you're never going to get anywhere. It's just not going to get done what needs to be done" (2007, Joan's member-check).  With saying the Pledge of Allegiance, "they are learning that it's a school protocol" (2007, Mary's member-check).
Learning to work with others	n=3	Lisa, Rose, Kate	"Lining up teaches them basically how to get along with other people, you can't always be first" (2007, Lisa's member-check)
Learning about competition	n=1	Kate	In not play, "they're learning a sense of competition...because most of the students do really enjoy the teacher's attention and compliments. And they do sort of enjoy competing with each other for the right answer" (2007, Kate's Interview).
<b>Physical</b>	<b>n=3</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue</b>	
Learning fine motor skills	n=3	<b>Lisa, Jane, Sue</b>	With writing the ABC's, you're "learning how to control your fingers" (2007, Sue's member-check).
<b>Communication</b>	<b>n=2</b>	<b>Lisa, Jane, Mary, Kate</b>	
Learning listening skills	n=2	Joan, Jane	With listening to a story, "...they're learning to pay attention. Like, what is the correct decorum when somebody is reading to you? And, you're learning to follow story, to listen carefully enough that you can understand what's going on from the person who's reading...following the sequence of events, how did this happen? Why?" (2007, Joan's interview).

Like play, the preservice teachers seemed to believe that not play encourages multiple forms of learning and development. That said, as a group, the preservice teachers seemed to emphasize one developmental domain over others, namely the cognitive domain and learning academic concepts. Specifically, when describing an individual activity, such as *zipping up your jacket* or *listening to a story*, the preservice teachers might suggest a form of learning other than cognitive development. However, when they discussed the notion of not play, in general, or the majority of individual not



play activities, they emphasized not play's role in cognitive development. Their view of not play seemed to align with the academic focus found in early childhood education today. For instance, Scott-Little et al.'s (2006) "content analysis of 46 learning standards documents developed by state level organizations" (p. 153) indicated that "the cognition and general knowledge domain has been emphasized more than the other domains" (p. 166). In line with their findings, in Texas where this study took place, the current prekindergarten and kindergarten state curriculum standards emphasize development and learning in the cognitive domain. For instance, over half of Texas' *Prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines* (TEA, 1999) and three-fourths of the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Kindergarten* (TEA, 1997) are dedicated to academic content areas, such as language arts, math, science and social studies. Thus, the preservice teachers' emphasis on not play's role in cognitive development seemed to align with a similar emphasis in early childhood education today.

In addition to emphasizing the cognitive domain when describing not play's role in learning and development, the preservice teachers also seemed to emphasize the connection between the teacher's role in not play and learning. Not only did three of the preservice teachers describe learning in not play as teacher mediated, such as Lisa who suggested that during not play children are "learning the things that maybe a kid might not learn if you leave him alone to figure things out" (2007, Lisa's interview), all seven preservice teachers suggested that teachers have a central teaching role in not play. For instance, Jane described the teacher's role in not play as, "...trying to get across something that just needs to be known. Basic facts everyone needs to know at the same level" (2007, Jane's interview), and Sue stated that "...for the not play the teacher would be more present and make sure they're getting what they need to get out of it" (2007, Sue's interview). Thus, the preservice teachers seemed to suggest that during not play the teacher has an active role in encouraging children's learning and development by teaching them what they need to know and by evaluating whether or not they have learned it.

The preservice teachers' descriptions of the teacher's role in not play contrasted with their descriptions of the teacher's role in play. Specifically, the preservice teachers

rarely described the teacher's role in play in the context of teaching children academic content. The only time the preservice teachers mentioned "teaching" during play came during our discussion of a teaching scenario in which the teacher actively engaged in children's play by questioning them about pictures they were painting (see *broad-based developmental approach*, Trawick-Smith, 2005, p. 222). During that discussion, two of the preservice teachers suggested that the teacher's actions in this scenario most reflected the role they would like to take in play. Specifically, Lisa stated that "the teacher kind of showed the students she was interested in what they were doing and had them kind of compare each other's work and it was fine" (2007, Lisa's member check) and Kate stated that:

I liked scenario four the best where the teacher is asking questions about the pictures. I feel like the students know a lot more than we expect sometimes and so we tend to tell them things and I think this method is more extracting it. You're not looking at the castle and saying "That's a pretty castle," which you tend to do, "That's a nice drawing." But, she is really probing as to why, "Why did you draw this?" "What is it for?" "How is it different?" "What makes it unique?" It just seems like she's analyzing it. And, I think in that you can find a lot more information than you would expect instead of just brushing it off (2007, Kate's interview).

Both of these preservice teachers saw value in teaching children concepts during these play activities; however, in line with the other preservice teachers, they also described multiple non-teaching roles for the teacher during play. For instance, Lisa stated that during play teachers "back off a little bit more... [and] let them [the children] interact with each other" (2007, Lisa's interview) and they focus on "mediating conflict and encouraging outsiders to form bonds with other children" (2007, Lisa's IIECE). And Kate stated that during play teachers need to "step back...[because]...the most important part is what students get out of the activities" (2007, Kate's IIECE); teachers "...tend to separate and do their own work while the students are playing...but [also] pay attention to what is going on between the students" (2007, Kate's interview); and teachers "try to analyze children's behavior and what this means about them as a student" (2007, Kate's

member check). Although they made space for the teacher to teach during play, it seemed to be tangential and not central to their beliefs about the teacher's role in play. Thus, for the preservice teachers, the teacher's role in not play seemed to align with the nonplay approach in which narrower forms of learning develop through the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student during direct instruction (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008). In contrast, the teacher's role in play seemed to align with the hands-off and narrowly-focused intervention approaches in which the teacher has a limited role in learning and development and multiple forms of learning and development occur naturally through an interaction between the child and the activity (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

On the one hand, it is not surprising that the preservice teachers described learning and development in play and not play and the teacher's role in each differently. It might be expected that activities falling into one category might have different learning outcomes and require different teaching roles than those falling into another category. On the other hand, the preservice teachers seemed to value the learning and development that occurs during not play more than the learning and development that occurs during play. For instance, when asked to discuss the benefits of not play, all seven preservice teachers described *learning* as its sole benefit and emphasized its importance in young children's lives. In contrast, the preservice teachers suggested that learning and development was one of several benefits of play. In terms of the former, describing the benefits of not play the preservice teachers stated:

**Jane:** ...the benefits for not play are learning basic skills that you need to function in society at what we would call an average level (2007, Jane's interview).

**Joan:** The benefits [of not play] are that you're learning. Academic learning has to happen. It may not be play, but it's essential. These kids have to learn ... I think that you can use play to involve kids in the learning, but academic learning has to happen. You have to reach a goal; you have to go to the next one. It's essential to the growing of a child (2007, Joan's interview).

**Kate:** [In not play, they're learning] the basic curriculum. Everything that students are expected to know that they're going to be building on for the rest of their education. I think kindergarten and preschool are absolutely an essential time for reading, spelling, numbers, days of the week, the most basic things that we will never review again (2007, Kate's interview).

**Lisa:** ... [On the not play side] you're learning more concrete things like your numbers and your alphabet... [And,] the benefits of not play are that they [the children] get things done (2007, Lisa's interview).

**Mary:** [With not play] children develop in the ways that they need so that they can grow, develop their minds. I mean they have to be educated. They have to learn to become a being. So, the benefits of not play are you're teaching the kids (2007, Mary's interview).

**Rose:** [The benefit of not play is that] they need to learn. The teacher just has a lot to teach them and present to them. They know it's time to learn. So, it's not all play. They know they need to really pay attention. It's different and they know it's different. They know it's something to really learn (2007, Rose's interview).

**Sue:** The benefits of the "not play" would be they're, I don't want to say actually learning something, but they're learning certain things that they need... They acquire skills that you think are important for them (2007, Sue's interview).

The preservice teachers seemed to believe that during not play children learn important information from the teacher that they need to function in society, as Joan noted not play is "...essential to the growing of the child" (2007, Joan's interview). In contrast, the preservice teachers neither described the learning during play as essential nor suggested that learning and development were the only function of play. Instead, they suggested that in addition to encouraging learning and development, play serves purposes that have nothing to do with learning and development, such as (a) offering children a break from not play, (b) allowing children to work off excess energy, and/or (c) making school fun.

First, four of the preservice teachers described play as a break from not play. For instance, Rose described one of the purposes of play as "downtime in between activities" and Joan stated that "during school it's a break from structured academics. It's time to let

loose. I think the biggest thing is it's a break, a load off your shoulders" (2007, Joan's interview). Similarly, Mary stated that P.E., an activity she categorized as play, offers a break from not play activities, stating, "I think it is ridiculous for teachers to ask their students to continuously sit through an entire day at a desk. Adults even find this task difficult themselves. P.E. allows for children to refresh their minds if being stationary is too hard for them" (2007, Mary's member-check). For these preservice teachers, play offers a break from the tedium of not play and in so doing prepares children to return to their not play activities refreshed and revitalized. This view of play as a break aligns with relaxation theories of play that suggest "...labor leaves humans mentally and physically spent. Such fatigue necessitates a certain amount of rest and sleep... [and] full recuperation was only thought possible when a person engaged in activities that allowed a release from the reality-based constraints of work" (Rubin et al., 1983, p. 695). Thus, for these preservice teachers, one of the underlying purposes of play seemed to be to allow children to rejuvenate in order to improve their ability to learn during not play.

Second, in addition to describing play as a break, three of the preservice teachers described play as an opportunity to get rid of pent up energy. For instance, in addition to believing that P.E. was a break, Mary also believed that "if students have too much energy that needs to be expelled, P.E. allows for that" (2007, Mary's member-check). Similarly, Jane believed play activities, like tag and kickball, which involve physical activity, help children by "getting rid of excess energy" (2007, Jane's member-check) and Rose believed that play was "an outlet for energy" (2007, Rose's IIECE) and a time for children to "let out their energy" (2007, Rose's interview). Here, the preservice teachers' beliefs seemed to align with the surplus energy theory of play, which grew out of the Enlightenment (Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Rubin et al. 1983), and suggests that "play is essentially 'blowing off steam'" (Rubin et al. p. 694). From this perspective, children have a defined amount of energy, some of which is used during not play. Any leftover energy, however, must be expelled through the "...superfluous and nonproductive enterprises" of play (Rubin et al., 1983, p. 695). Thus, once that energy is released children can refocus on the important learning that occurs during not play.

Third, three of the preservice teachers described play as making school fun. For instance, Kate suggested that play helped alleviate the inherently unpleasant quality of school. Specifically, she suggested that "...sometimes school work is really not [fun]. And, even though you try really hard to come up with a good fun activity or a fun worksheet, the kids aren't really going to like it sometimes" (2007, Kate's member-check). However, by incorporating play activities into the classroom she believed that children "...could enjoy themselves" and have "the best experience in school" (2007, Kate's IIECE). Similarly, Sue suggested that play "...lets the kids look forward to something, to be excited to go to school, it's fun" (2007, Sue's interview). In these instances, play seems to make school bearable. In this regard, play seems to have an additive role in which its inclusion in the classroom makes school palatable for young children.

Regardless of whether they described play as giving children a break, allowing children to release excess energy, and/or making school fun, each of the seven preservice teachers believed that play had purposes other than encouraging learning and development. This position contrasted with their belief that the singular function of not play was to encourage narrow forms of learning, which they described as essential to young children's lives. Because of this, even though all of the preservice teachers wanted to include play in their classrooms, none of them advocated for an entirely play-based curriculum. Rather, they seemed to believe that play should comprise a portion of the day and occur within certain timeframes. The extent to which they would limit play, however, varied among the preservice teachers. Two preservice teacher's responses—Mary's and Jane's—seemed to highlight the continuum of preservice teachers' beliefs. While Mary believed that play should occur either outside of the classroom during recess and auxiliary classes, or inside the classroom during a circumscribed free choice time; Jane seemed to believe that play could be integrated throughout the day. To conclude this section, I describe each of these preservice teachers' perspectives in turn.

Mary described herself as being supportive of play's inclusion in the early childhood classroom. Early in the semester when asked if she would include play in her future early childhood classroom, she wrote "Of course, I will allow/encourage my

students to play in my classroom!” (2007, Mary, IIECE). And, during our interview, she indicated that she would include a variety of play activities in her classroom, such as Play-Doh, dress-up clothes, tag, traditional board games, water and sand table, kickball, outdoor play, art time, and P.E. Not only did Mary plan to include these play activities, she believed play had important benefits for young children. For instance, describing the benefits of play, she stated that “I feel that there is much learned from simple play. The hidden skills that are being mastered are extensive. Children learn concepts ranging from sharing/playing nicely to societal gender roles” (2007, Mary IIECE). Thus, for Mary, play encourages children’s learning and development across several developmental domains.

Although Mary believed play encourages learning and development and wanted to include play in her future classroom, she also believed that play should be restricted to two discrete times: outside of the classroom during auxiliary classes and recess and inside the classroom during a free choice period. First, Mary indicated that her ideal early childhood classroom would include time for P.E., art, music, and recess. She believed all four activities were play and that all four occurred outside of the classroom context. Second, when describing how she would incorporate play into a hypothetical kindergarten schedule (see Appendix D), Mary indicated that she would include a discrete free choice center time, stating that:

The thing on here is they don't have centers, on the schedule, they just have academics. I guess I'd have to switch it around because I want to incorporate centers in there and maybe within those centers...I know they have where you rotate centers and then on Friday they have free center time. So you can do whatever and I'm assuming that play goes on within those centers, like if you have a house center or a mail center... (2007, Mary's member check).

Even though Mary wanted play in the classroom, she seemed to limit the amount of time that children could play. Specifically, she seemed to suggest that children would only be allowed to play outside of the classroom during auxiliary classes and one day a week during a free choice time. In this regard, Mary seemed to adopt a nonplay approach in

which work and play are dichotomized and play has a tangential instead of a central role in the curriculum (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Like Mary, Jane described herself as being supportive of play's inclusion in the early childhood classroom. Early in the semester when asked if she would include play in her future early childhood classroom, she wrote "I will definitely encourage play in my primary classroom" (2007, Jane's IIECE). And, during our interview, she indicated that she would include a variety of play activities in her classroom, such as multiple forms of pretend, games, music activities, art activities, puzzles, physical activities, show and tell, simple cooking, and storytelling. In addition to wanting to include these activities, Jane believed play had important benefits for young children. For instance, describing the purposes of play, she stated:

I believe that play will serve as a uniting force in the students, allowing them to create bonds with one another. This will lead to a comfortable classroom environment. Also, I believe play is integral to the expansion of young minds, it allows children to raise questions of their own (2007, Jane's IIECE)

Here, Jane suggested that play encourages children's social-emotional development by allowing them to develop relationships with each other. She also seemed to believe that the connections they develop with one another during play lead to social cohesion in the classroom and result in a more pleasant classroom environment. Beyond play's social-emotional functions, Jane also seemed to believe that it encourages individual cognitive growth by allowing children to develop their own questions.

Unlike Mary who believed that play should be limited to two discrete timeframes, Jane believed that play could be interwoven throughout the day. Not only did she believe that play could occur outside of the classroom, indicated by her categorization of recess, art and music activities as play, she also believed that children should have free time within the classroom and suggested that play could be incorporated into academic content areas. For instance, when describing how she would incorporate play into a hypothetical kindergarten schedule (see Appendix D), she stated that "I think that there should be some free time" (2007, Jane's member check). In addition, she described how play could be incorporated into literacy activities, science and social studies.



**Jane:** ... reading and writing you could incorporate play, like have different stations. One could be letter writing and they get to write letters to whoever they want or, we talked about somewhere having mailboxes for the students and you can put in at anytime little notes to any class member. I think that that's a really good idea. And that could be seen as play because kids are folding notes, writing things, whatever they want in it and that's creative. And with social studies and science I think that there's lots of opportunity....

**Me:** And, in what way would you incorporate science and social studies?

**Jane:** ...Science experiments can be play...if you let them choose what kind of thing they want to experiment and how they want to experiment. Just kind of give a basic overview. I'm thinking about volcanoes, the typical science experiment. I can see in my head a little boy just having so much fun playing with the volcano and turning it into a story line (2007, Jane's member check).

In contrast with Mary, Jane believed that play could be incorporated throughout the school day. Instead of envisioning one or two discrete play times, she described incorporating play into academic areas, such as literacy, social studies and science.

Although Jane described incorporating multiple opportunities for children to play during the day, she stated that her support for play did not translate into support for an exclusively play-based curriculum. She believed in using a variety instead of a singular pedagogical tool.

**Jane:** ...I don't want you to think that I am advocating only play. I was actually talking at the little nonprofit fair the other day to some people from the Happy School, and I feel like they are on the other end of the spectrum from Stowe Academy. I asked one of them what a teacher would do with her classroom. And they were like, 'Every teacher brings a different thing to the students. Their soul is what they give. Whatever you feel like you can give, we encourage peace and understanding.' And it sounded like they don't do any academics... I mean they encourage multicultural awareness, learning about cultures. But it sounded to me like they're leaving out these things (*referring to academics*) which you also need.

So my class would have a balance of the two. Not too much ‘not play’ and not too much ‘play’ (2007, Jane’s interview).

While Jane believed that play should be incorporated into early childhood education, she did not believe that it should be the sole focus of the classroom. Instead, she seemed to believe that children needed to have a certain amount of time dedicated to not play as well.

In line with both Jane and Mary, all of the preservice teachers suggested that play was valuable, but the extent to which they believed it should be part of the curriculum varied. On one end of the continuum, Mary believed that play should be incorporated outside of the classroom or during a circumscribed free time occurring one day per week. On the other end of the continuum, Jane believed that play could be incorporated throughout the school day. Thus, as Trawick-Smith (2005, 2008) has suggested, teachers may incorporate play into their classroom but how it looks and sounds may vary from classroom to classroom. For the preservice teachers, although the amount of time they believed should be dedicated to play varied, they seemed to share the belief that play was less essential than not play in the early childhood classroom.

### **Exploring contradictions.**

Each set of contradictions, namely that play is child-determined and teacher-controlled, play is fun and unpleasant, and play is valuable and unessential, demonstrated the unbounded quality of the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play. Unlike knowledge systems, which “have relatively well-defined domains of application” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321), belief systems can be “extended in radical and unpredictable ways” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321). Thus, because belief systems are not logically structured, a person may hold incompatible beliefs that reside side by side together without creating dissonance or tension for the individual holding them (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992).

According to Vygotsky (1986) internal inconsistencies are a “peculiar phenomenon” of complex thinking (p. 126). Specifically, he suggested that for individuals thinking in complexes, “one word may in different situations have different or even opposite meanings as long as there is some associative link between them” (p. 126).

For the preservice teachers, their multiple beliefs about play, its role in learning and development, the teacher's role in play, and its role in the early childhood classroom, were linked together by *play*. Because the main connection among their espoused beliefs was the term itself, as they described different aspects of play, the beliefs that they surfaced, at times, conflicted with one another. The preservice teachers' description of play as fun and unpleasant provides a case in point. Specifically, six of the preservice teachers described enjoyment as either a characteristic and/or benefit of play. However, as they began discussing individual play activities or the teacher's role in play some of the beliefs they surfaced contradicted with the notion that play is enjoyable. Thus, while the multiple beliefs about play surfaced by the preservice teachers were not always consistent with one another, they were always related to play.

Finally, in addition to demonstrating the unbounded quality of beliefs, the evidence that the majority of the preservice teachers surfaced similar contradictory beliefs suggested that even though they have individualized beliefs about play their beliefs may have some common areas of overlap. This simultaneously unique and overlapping quality of their beliefs align with practicing teachers whose understanding of play has been described as both "idiosyncratic" and as sharing commonalities across "many dimensions" (Reifel, 2007, p. 1). A case in point, Bennett et al. (1997) found that the nine teachers in their study used multiple overlapping qualities to describe play, such as enjoyable, child-directed, and independent. Thus, similar to practicing teachers, preservice teachers' beliefs about play while unique may share common themes.

**Summary: Contradictions.**

In this section, I used a third feature of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, namely that they are contradictory, to further illustrate the unbounded quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Specifically, the majority of the preservice teachers suggested that (a) play is child-determined but teacher-controlled, (b) play is fun but unpleasant, and (c) play is valuable but unessential. These contradictions indicated that although their beliefs were internally inconsistent they were all related to play. In addition, the overlap among the contradictions surfaced by the preservice teachers

suggested that some commonalities exist among the preservice teachers' individualized notions of play.

***Summary: Unboundedness: Fluctuations and Contradictions***

Taken together the fluctuations and contradictions in the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, two features of Vygotskian (1986) complexes, demonstrated the unbounded quality of those beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Specifically, the fluctuations demonstrated the loosely-structured feature of the preservice teachers' beliefs, a quality they evidenced by adding to, refining, affirming, and changing their beliefs as they surfaced them. In addition, the contradictions in the preservice teachers' beliefs demonstrated how they extended their beliefs in "radical and unpredictable ways" (p. 321). In the section that follows, I discuss what the structural elements of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play tell us about their beliefs.

**Section Conclusion: Beliefs as a Developmental Milestone in Conceptualizing Play**

Examining the preservice teachers' beliefs through Nespor's (1987) and Vygotsky's (1986) work provides different insights into the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. From Nespor's (1987) perspective, the evidence demonstrating the non-consensual and unbounded quality of the preservice teachers' beliefs indicated that preservice teachers' responses *represented* their beliefs about play. In contrast, the three elements of Vygotskian (1986) complexes that I used to illustrate the non-consensual and unbounded quality of the preservice teachers beliefs provided a different insight. Specifically, the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions within the preservice teachers' beliefs about play reflected a developmental milestone in their thinking about it.

According to Vygotsky (1986), conceptual understanding develops through a three phased continuum. In the first phase, *heaps*, an individual's understanding is based on her subjective impressions alone (Blunden, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986) and ideas are "linked by chance" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 110). In the second phase, *complexes*, individuals base their understanding on "bonds actually existing between objects" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 112), which develop from their direct experiences. For a person thinking in complexes

a word may have multiple meanings and these meanings may fluctuate, that is they may “...be changed one or more times” (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 264).

Furthermore, unlike the unifying logic of concepts, complexes may contain internal inconsistencies and be contradictory (Vygotsky, 1986). In the third phase, *concepts*, “abstracted traits are synthesized anew and the resulting abstracted traits become the main instrument of thought” (Blunden, 1997, p. 8).

Thus, the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions within the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play may suggest that they were thinking in complexes. Because of this, they had not integrated their understating of play into a coherent framework. If they had, they would have been thinking in *concepts*, the final phase of Vygotsky’s continuum. In other words, if the preservice teachers had fully synthesized their beliefs about play, they would have used a general framework to discuss play. For instance, if the preservice teachers had been thinking conceptually, they might have consistently used the same attributes to describe play—such as play is *nonliteral*, *intrinsically motivated*, *process oriented*, *freely chosen*, and *involves positive affect* (Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005)—and then used the inclusion and exclusion of these attributes to systematically categorize activities as play, not play, or middle. The preservice teachers, however, did not describe play in this fashion. Instead, the preservice teachers unevenly surfaced multiple and contradictory beliefs about play.

Although the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions within the preservice teachers’ beliefs suggested that they had not fully conceptualized play, these same elements suggested that their thinking about play had developed beyond *heaps*, the first phase of Vygotsky’s (1986) continuum of conceptual development. Specifically, Vygotsky suggested that thinking in heaps is both random and arbitrary. That is, thinking is “linked by chance” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 110) and based on subjective impressions alone (Blunden, 1997; Vygotsky, 1986). For instance, if the preservice teachers had been thinking in heaps, they might have categorized activities as play by randomly marking every other activity on their list as play thus basing their categorization on the physical position of an activity on the page instead of qualities directly associated with play itself. None of the preservice teachers thinking, however, demonstrated the qualities inherent to

heaps. Instead, like complexes, their beliefs about play, although not “abstract and logical” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 113) seemed reasonable, interrelated, and connected to their prior experiences (Vygotsky, 1986). Thus, from a Vygotskian perspective (1986) the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions within the preservice teachers’ beliefs about play represented a developmental milestone in their thinking about it. In the next chapter, I discuss implications these findings have for research and teacher education.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences that shape those beliefs, with the expectation that such understanding might assist early childhood teacher educators in addressing this complex area of early childhood education. Given the “messy” quality of beliefs (Pajares, 1992, p. 307), and the suggestion that an “articulate conversation [about beliefs] must demand not only clarity of thought and expression, but also preciseness of word choice and meaning” (Pajares, 1992, p. 309), when framing this study I initially used a single, relevant, and well-established model of beliefs (Nespor, 1987). Although comprehensive, during the data analysis process, I found that Nespor's work alone could not fully explain the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. And, I chose to use a complementary framework, Vygotsky (1986), to describe, to analyze, and to interpret my data. In this chapter, I describe how these two frameworks informed the answers to my research questions and I discuss their implications for research and teacher education. I conclude the chapter by discussing the limitations of this study and by suggesting directions for future research.

### COMPLEMENTARY FRAMEWORKS AND PRESERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY

The findings of this study came about *because* I used two frameworks instead of one to describe, to analyze, and to interpret the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Together these frameworks provided insights into my research questions that neither framework could provide alone. For instance, in terms of the following research questions—(a) What do the preservice teachers believe influenced their beliefs about play? (b) And, how do these influences appear to have shaped preservice teachers' beliefs about play?—using Nespor (1987) combined with Vygotsky (1986) led me to find that the preservice teachers' beliefs about play were shaped by multiple influences including

experiences, feelings, ideals and universal assumptions and that these influences worked in concert to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Had I only used Vygotsky (1987), I would have only examined the experiences that had shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. By using Nespor (1987), I found that influences beyond experience alone shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs.

Although a significant body of research suggests that experiences both prior to and during teacher education influence preservice teachers' beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Klugman, 1996; Levin & He, 2008; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989), this research has not gone beyond preservice teachers' concrete experiences to determine whether and how other influences might shape their beliefs. The findings of this study extend current research on preservice teachers' beliefs by indicating that a broader range of influences, beyond experience alone, seem to shape their beliefs about play and that these influence have a complicated interrelationship. For instance, working together these influences seemed to shape how the preservice teachers' define play and its role in the early childhood classroom. As a case in point, when describing her beliefs about whether and how to include violent play in the early childhood classroom, Lisa drew on (a) experiences, "I just remember playing games like that [cops and robbers] when I was a kid" (2007, Lisa's interview); (b) feelings, "I think with my own classroom I'll feel more comfortable [allowing the kids to act out violent stories]" (2007, Lisa's member-check); (c) ideals, "[with] pretending to be a character from a violent rated R movie if the situation happened I would deal with it. But, it's not something I'd want" (2007, Lisa's interview); and (d) universal assumptions, "I think it's [playing cops and robbers] kind of normal" (2007, Lisa's interview). Thus, similar to inservice teachers (Nespor, 1987), preservice teachers seem to draw on multiple influences when formulating their beliefs.

In addition to the four influences working in concert to shape their beliefs about play, the findings of this study suggest that a unique interrelationship between the



preservice teachers' affective response to an event in their lives shapes the extent to which that experience informs their beliefs about play. This finding suggests that feelings may play a role in the symbiotic relationship between everyday and classroom experiences described by Vygotsky (1986) and aligns with the position of other researchers who suggest that the strength of one's beliefs influences whether and how those beliefs change (Green, 1971; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). For instance, in line with Jane's high school experience in a play-based early childhood classroom, which strongly resonated with her, and in contrast to her experience in a nonplay classroom (see Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008) at Stowe Academy, which did not resonate with her, Jane believed that play should be included in the early childhood classroom stating that "I will definitely encourage play in my primary classroom" (2007, Jane's IIECE). Thus, similar to inservice teachers (Nespor, 1987), preservice teachers' emotional response to an experience influences whether and how that experience shapes their beliefs.

Thus, had I only used Vygotsky (1986) to frame this study, I would not have explored the multiple influences beyond experience that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play nor would I have examined the complex interrelationship among those influences. Conversely, had I only used Nespor (1987) to frame this study, I might have explored the multiple influences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and their interrelationship; however, I might not have examined the two distinct types of experiences that Vygotsky (1986) described as shaping thinking, namely *everyday* and *classroom*. Nor would I have examined the unique manner in which these two types of experiences influenced the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Specifically, these experiences seemed to have a symbiotic relationship in which the preservice teachers used their beliefs about play developed from their everyday experiences to evaluate their classroom experiences, and they used their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs. For instance, in terms of the influence of everyday experiences, the portraits of Joan and Mary demonstrated how their childhood experiences seemed to lead to diverging beliefs about the role of play in the early childhood classroom and to different conclusions about two classroom experiences, namely a course reading on play, Dorrell (2004), and their respective placements at Stowe Academy. With regard to

classroom experiences, Kate's portrait demonstrated how participating in the interview portion of the study led her to a new understanding of how she defined play, and how participating in the oral dictation and dramatization project provided her with concrete experiences to draw upon to explain in greater detail the activity and its value to young children.

The preservice teachers' use of everyday experiences to make sense of their classroom experiences parallel similar findings on preservice teachers' beliefs generally that suggest preservice teachers' prior experiences shape their beliefs (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Levin & He, 2008; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001; Weinstein, 1988, 1989) and in turn these beliefs influence what and how they learn in teacher preparation (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Genishi et al., 2001; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Weinstein, 1998, 1989; Wideen et al., 1998). In addition, the preservice teachers' use of their classroom experiences to alter and/or add to their incoming beliefs about play affirms research that suggests university and field-based experience may influence some preservice teachers' beliefs (Anderson, 2001; Gill et al., 2004; Groulx, 2001; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Hart, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1989; Isikoglu, 2008; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Linek et al., 1999; Nettle, 1998; Scott, 2005; Skamp & Mueller, 2001). Accordingly, the findings of this study may suggest parallels between how experiences influences preservice teachers' beliefs generally and how they influence their beliefs about play.

Additionally, the findings of this study extend current research by highlighting an additional experience that may shape preservice teachers' beliefs, namely engaging in one-on-one discussions with a researcher. While only two of the preservice teachers suggested these discussions had influenced their beliefs about play, all of the preservice teachers appeared to cultivate their beliefs over the course of our discussions, which they evidenced by refining, adding to, affirming and changing their beliefs during our discussions. In line with Vygotsky's (1986) suggestion that a symbiotic relationship

between presenting one's ideas and the development of those ideas, the findings of this study suggest that discussing their beliefs about play may lead preservice teachers to develop them.

Not only did Vygotsky's (1986) work provide a more detailed picture of the types of experiences that shape preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the manner in which they shape them than Nespor's (1987) work alone would have, it also provided further insights into the following research questions—(a) What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in early childhood education? (b) What do preservice teachers' believe constitutes play? (c) What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the role of play in learning and development? (d) What are preservice teachers' beliefs about the teacher's role in play?—than using Nespor's work alone would have. Specifically, Vygotsky's (1986) continuum of conceptual development provided a more detailed framework for exploring the non-consensual and unbounded qualities (see Nespor, 1987) of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, and, in turn, led me to find that the preservice teachers had not fully synthesized their beliefs about play, which was evidenced in the multiple meanings, contradictions, and fluctuations in their beliefs.

These findings affirm and extend the single study on preservice teachers' beliefs about play (Klugman, 1996), and research on preservice teachers' beliefs in general, in several ways. First, similar to preservice teachers' beliefs about play (Klugman, 1996) and preservice teachers' beliefs generally (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Minor et al., 2002; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Smith, 1997), the preservice teachers in this study had diverse beliefs. Even though commonalities existed among some of the attributes used by the preservice teachers to describe play—for instance, all seven preservice teachers believed that play is child-determined—no two preservice teachers used the same combination of attributes to define play. Instead, based on the influences that had shaped their beliefs, they strung these attributes together in unique ways. Thus, for each of the preservice teachers, play seemed to have an individualized meaning consisting of multiple parts.

Second, the findings of this study extend Klugman's (1996) by demonstrating that in addition to having diverse beliefs about play, the preservice teachers' beliefs about

play were, at times, contradictory. For instance, they suggested that (a) play is child-determined and teacher controlled; (b) play is enjoyable and unpleasant, and (c) play is valuable and unessential. According to Vygotsky (1986), for individuals thinking in complexes, “one word may in different situations have different or even opposite meanings as long as there is some associative link between them” (p. 126). For the preservice teachers, their multiple beliefs about play, its role in learning and development, the teacher’s role in play, and its role in the early childhood classroom, were linked together by *play*. Because the main connection among their espoused beliefs was the term itself, as they described different aspects of play, the beliefs that they surfaced, at times, conflicted with one another.

Third, the findings of this study extend research on preservice teachers’ beliefs about play (see Klugman, 1996) by demonstrating that the preservice teachers did not surface these multiple and contradictory beliefs evenly, but rather, their beliefs about play seemed to fluctuate. Specifically, in this study the preservice teachers would surface a belief about play then affirm, refine, add to, or change it over the course of our discussions. In some cases these fluctuations occurred between the interview at the beginning of the semester and the member checking session at the end of the semester. In other cases, however, these fluctuations occurred during the course of a single hour long discussion.

Beyond extending research on preservice teachers’ beliefs about play, the findings of this study also suggest that unlike preservice teachers’ beliefs generally, which have been characterized as robust (Pajares, 1992; Lortie, 1975), preservice teachers’ beliefs about play appear to be transitory as evidenced by the refinements, additions, affirmations, and changes the preservice teachers made to their beliefs about play. Moreover, these findings provide an alternate perspective to researchers who suggest that longitudinal research conducted over several years from preservice to inservice yields the richest findings on changes in beliefs (Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998). Specifically, the findings of this study suggest that preservice teachers’ beliefs about play may be constantly changing and within a relatively small timeframe, such as an hour long one-on-one interview.

Thus, as evidenced by this study's findings using two frameworks (Nespor, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986) to describe, to analyze, and to interpret my data provided insights into my research questions that neither framework could have provided alone. In the next section, I describe the implications of these findings for research.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Literature on beliefs has extensively addressed the challenges of defining and conceptualizing them (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Kagan, 1990; Munby et al., 2001; Richardson, 1996, 2003; Pajares, 1992). For instance, not only do beliefs "...travel in disguise often under alias—attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy" (Pajares, 1992, p. 309), there are also multiple ways to conceptualize them, such as beliefs as their own form of cognition or as a form of cognition connected to or within other thought processes such as knowledge and attitudes (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 2003). Responding to these challenges, Pajares (1992) suggested that "it will not be possible for researchers to come to grips with teachers' beliefs...without first deciding what they wish *belief* to mean and how this meaning will differ from similar constructs" (p. 308).

In contrast to Pajares (1992), the findings of this study suggest a need for researchers to broaden and not to limit how they explore beliefs. Specifically, by narrowly defining and conceptualizing beliefs, researchers may inadvertently limit the findings of their studies. A notion embedded within randomization provides an analogous lens for explaining this proposition. In experimental research, one way to control for factors affecting an experiment's outcome would be "to narrow the sample to individuals who are in every way identical" (Borich, n.d., p. 13). Although such a narrow sample would control the factors influencing the study, it also "would restrict to a narrow and possibly inconsequential group the population to which we wish to generalize our findings" (p. 13). Just as controlling for every factor of an experiment limits its practical application, limiting beliefs research to one term, one definition, and/or one

conceptualization of it may circumscribe the scope and relevance of those study's findings. Specifically, as described in the previous section, the findings of this study came about *because* I used two frameworks instead of one to explore the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Thus instead of "cleaning up" beliefs research (Pajares, 1992, p. 307), researchers may want to embrace its messiness by using multiple frameworks to examine them. Doing so may provide them with insights that a single framework alone could not.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

Beyond implications for research, the findings of this study have several implications for teacher education. Specifically, these findings (a) demonstrate the challenge of defining and conceptualizing play in teacher education; (b) suggest that preservice teachers' beliefs about play are an asset to their learning; (c) illustrate the need to identify the multiple influences that shape preservice teachers' beliefs about play; and (d) provide a possible pedagogical approach for addressing play in teacher education. In the following section, each will be discussed in turn.

### **Challenges of Defining and Conceptualizing Play in Teacher Education**

The findings of this study illustrate the difficulty of defining and conceptualizing play in teacher education. First, the multiple meanings, contradictions, and fluctuation within the preservice teachers' beliefs about play reflect the larger challenge of defining and conceptualizing play within the field of early childhood education (Ailwood, 2003; Fein & Stork, 1981; Johnson et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2005; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; McLane et al., 1996; Reifel, 1999). As reinforced by the preservice teachers in this study, the meaning of play varies from person to person and group to group (Ailwood, 2003; Frost et al., 2005, 2008; Klugman & Fasoli, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008); is elusive (McLane et al., 1996); and incongruous (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Even though the term itself is mired in ambiguity (Sutton-Smith, 1997), early childhood educational organizations, such as NAEYC continue to emphasize the critical importance of play in children's lives and education (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Yet, it is unclear

what is meant by *play*. Specifically, the most recent DAP statement seems to describe play in terms of form, such as “physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules” (p. 14), and their benefits, namely multiple forms of learning and development. However, as the preservice teachers in this study demonstrated even when the preservice teachers identified the same activities as play their reasons for doing so varied. For instance, although Sue and Jane categorized *singing the ABC’s* as play, Sue categorized this activity as play because she believed it was fun while Jane categorized it as play because she believed it was creative. Thus, although NAEYC and other early childhood stakeholders vocally encourage the use of play, on a practical level it is unclear what they are advocating for. Accordingly, as Reifel (1999) has previously suggested, if early childhood teacher educators plan to address play in their programs, they themselves need to become clear on what they mean by *play*.

Second, the absence of a universal understanding of play makes incorporating it into a theoretically-aligned teacher education program challenging. Research suggests that a comprehensive and consistent vision of teaching and learning is the most effective method to support preservice teachers’ development during teacher education (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Hart, 2002; Levin, 2003; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003). Yet, as this study demonstrated, play not only had multiple meanings for the preservice teachers, it also seemed to have differing meanings in the university and field-based portions of the course. While Dr. Ryan addressed multiple perspectives of play, such as (a) its purposes (Cooper, 1993; Dorrell, 2004; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (b) creating a context for it in the classroom (Cooper, 1993; Dorrell, 2004; Johnson et al., 1999; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (c) illustrating the teacher’s role in play (Cooper, 1993; Johnson et al., 1999; Katch, 2001, 2003; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992); (d) addressing issues that may arise during play, such as exclusion (Katch, 2001, 2003; Paley 1992); and (e) describing specific types of play, such as violent play (Katch, 2001) and oral dictation and dramatization (Cooper, 1993; McLane & McNamee, 1990; Paley 1992), the field placement teachers seemed to address only one aspect of play, namely demonstrating how to incorporate play using a nonplay approach (Trawick-Smith, 2005, 2008).

Therefore, when addressing play, teacher educators must confront not only preservice teachers' varied and contradictory beliefs about play, but (also) the multiple meanings of play encountered by preservice teachers in their university and field-based experiences and present within literature on play.

A final challenge of defining and conceptualizing play in teacher education is that *play* as a construct and *belief* as a form of cognition share two underlying qualities, namely variation and contradiction. Consequently, it is unclear which aspects of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play reflect the underlying qualities of play and which aspects reflect the underlying qualities of their beliefs. Like play, beliefs are varied and contradictory. The variation in the preservice teachers' beliefs about play aligns with literature suggesting that beliefs are personal (i.e. non-consensual) (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Because beliefs are personal, that is they are not based on "...well-established canons of argument" (Nespor, 1987, p. 321), they may vary from person to person. In line with this proposition, research has demonstrated that preservice teachers hold diverse beliefs (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; File & Gullo, 2002; Klugman, 1996; Minor et al., 2002; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Smith, 1997). And, because beliefs are loosely-structured and not well-defined, "...they can be extended in radical and unpredictable ways" (p. 321). Accordingly, an individual can simultaneously hold seemingly incompatible beliefs (Pajares, 1992).

Thus, the multiple and contradictory beliefs about play surfaced by the preservice teachers may not only reflect the underlying qualities of play, but (also) the underlying qualities of the preservice teachers' beliefs. Consequently, the preservice teachers make sense of the multiple meanings and contradictions within play through a form of cognition which allows these multiple meanings and contradictions to go unquestioned. For instance, over the course of this study, none of the preservice teachers raised questions about the contradictions within their beliefs about play. In the closest related examples, Kate questioned how she had defined play noting that she could identify play activities but did not have an overarching framework for characterizing those activities as play, and Mary raised questions about the challenges of defining play generally. Like the other preservice teachers, however, Kate and Mary did not raise questions about or



describe their beliefs as contradictory even though, similar to the other preservice teachers, they were. Thus, teacher educators not only need to address the content of preservice teachers' beliefs about play, but (also) the quality of their thinking about it.

### **Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play as an Asset to Learning About Play**

Research reflects varying views on the value of preservice teachers' beliefs within teacher education. For instance, Pajares (1992), in his review of literature, suggested that researchers have described preservice teachers' beliefs as "insidious," as "dysfunctional" and as incompatible with "the educational hopes that teacher educators have for preservice teachers" (p. 323). In contrast, Holt-Reynolds (1992) cautioned teacher educators by stating they should be sensitive towards preservice teachers' incoming beliefs. She suggested that preservice teachers' beliefs often motivate them to enter the teaching profession. Additionally, she noted that their beliefs are valuable to teacher educators themselves because "drawing on their recent and still accessible histories as students, preservice teachers know something about the relationship of student engagement with material and student interest that our own research has overlooked" (p. 346). Thus, instead of perceiving preservice teachers' beliefs negatively, teacher educators could view them as potential sources of information.

The findings of this study support Holt-Reynolds (1992) conclusion by demonstrating that the preservice teachers' beliefs about play may be an asset to their learning about it. Specifically, for the preservice teachers, the incoming beliefs they developed from their everyday experiences provided a foundation for their learning about play in Dr. Ryan's course. For instance, Joan's play-based childhood experiences provided her with a concrete model through which she could make sense of her placement at Stowe Academy. As she noted:

I expected to see [at Stowe] what we had in preschool, just a lot of playing, a lot of fun, allowing a child to be three and four years old... [And,] I think it's too much academics. I think it's way too much. I think it's sad, I think they're losing part of their childhood. There is a ton more academics than I thought there would be and a lot less play than I thought there would be (2007, Joan's interview).

Thus, Joan could raise questions about the play practices at Stowe Academy *because* she had previous everyday experiences and corollary beliefs with which she could compare and contrast these newer classroom experiences. Therefore, regardless of whether or not preservice teachers' incoming beliefs about play align with the content of their teacher education courses, these beliefs provide a framework for preservice teachers to begin to make sense of course content. Thus, as Vygotsky (1986) suggested, spontaneous concepts learned through everyday experiences are essential to the development of scientific concepts encountered during classroom experiences. Specifically, if preservice teachers entered their preparation programs without any everyday experiences with play, their beliefs about play would be less developed, and therefore they would be less prepared to learn about play. This perspective moves away from positioning preservice teachers' incoming beliefs as a problem or obstacle and instead positions them as an essential component for learning about play during teacher preparation.

### **Identifying the Multiple Influences That Shape Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Play**

The finding that multiple influences worked together to shape the preservice teachers' beliefs about play suggests that to effectively address play in teacher preparation teacher educators need to identify the sources of preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Doing so may inform their practice in two manners. First, knowing the sources of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play may demonstrate which beliefs they are most open to addressing (Levin & He, 2008). For instance, Green (1971) has suggested that beliefs based on evidence may be more open to change than those that are not, he stated:

When beliefs are held without regard to evidence, or contrary to evidence, or apart from good reasons or the canons for testing reasons and evidence, then I shall say they are held nonevidentially. It follows immediately that beliefs held nonevidentially cannot be modified by introducing evidence or reasons. They cannot be changed by rational criticism. The point is embodied in a familiar attitude: "Don't bother me with facts; I have made up my mind." When beliefs,

however, are held on the basis of evidence or reasons, they can be rationally criticized and therefore can be modified in the light of further evidence or better reasons. I shall say that beliefs held in that way are held evidentially (p. 48). For the preservice teachers in this study, some of their beliefs were evidential, that is developed out of their lived experience; while other beliefs were nonevidential, that is developed from their feelings, ideals, and universal assumptions. From Green's perspective, the beliefs rooted in the preservice teachers' feelings, ideals and universal assumptions may be more difficult to impact than those based on evidence from their first hand experience. As a case in point, Joan's belief that violent play should be excluded from the classroom did not appear to be based on any first hand experience; but rather, her idealized notion of the types of play children should engage in. As she stated, "I don't think that playing cops and robbers and shooting people produces anything positive" (2007, Joan's interview). Because this belief did not appear to be based in evidence, it may be more challenging to impact than if it had been. For teacher educators, knowing the source of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play could demonstrate which of those beliefs the preservice teachers are most open to addressing. Accordingly, this information may highlight the avenue through which teacher educators can have the most impact on their preservice teachers' beliefs about play.

Second, in addition to demonstrating which beliefs the preservice teachers may be most open to addressing, identifying the influences on preservice teachers' beliefs about play may also illustrate the experiences that will have the greatest impact on their beliefs. For instance, as previously noted, Jane's high school experience in a play-based kindergarten classroom resonated with her more strongly than her experience in a kindergarten classroom at Stowe Academy which incorporated limited amounts of play. Accordingly, she believed that early childhood classrooms should include play just as her high school field placement had. Thus, on a very basic level, the impact of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs about play may be related in part to the preservice teachers' emotional response to a course and its content. This presents a challenge for teacher educators, namely how do you provide experiences that individually resonate with a diverse set of preservice teachers without making sacrifices to the

curriculum? For instance, in this study, all seven preservice teachers described course-related experiences as influencing their beliefs about play. However, the particular course related experiences that they cited and the extent those experiences shaped their beliefs about play varied. A case in point, Rose described the university-based readings and discussions and her field placement at Stowe Academy as having the greatest influence on her beliefs about play. The other six preservice teachers, however, either ranked these experiences lower, or in some cases, did not cite them as influences on their beliefs at all, such as Joan who did not believe the course readings had influenced her beliefs about play and Lisa who did not believe her field placement had influenced her beliefs about play. Thus, understanding which experiences resonate with preservice teachers may help teacher educators refine their coursework to better align with the needs of their preservice teachers.

### **One-on-One Discussions as a Pedagogical Tool for Learning About Play**

As demonstrated by the finding that the interview portion of this study influenced some of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play, one-on-one discussions between preservice teachers and teacher educators may be a potential pedagogical tool for addressing play in teacher preparation programs. Even though I used three data sources in this study—interviews, direct observations, and document analysis—the one-on-one discussions I had with each preservice teacher seemed to provide the most detailed information about their beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs. Although they addressed these issues during class and in writing assignments, time constraints and page limitations restricted the extent to which they could fully surface their beliefs about play. As Mary noted,

If anything, the fact that I got to talk about my education viewpoints one on one with someone was more valuable to me than the actual seminar class. Granted, the seminar shaped some of my views, but I enjoyed being able to talk it out without 15 [sic] other students commenting on it for once (2007, Mary's member-check).

Thus, in a class setting preservice teachers have less time to develop, uninterrupted, a cohesive picture of their beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs than they

would in an individual one-on-one discussion. Moreover, if discussing their beliefs about play helps to cultivate them, as the findings of this study suggest, it would seem that the greater the amount of time preservice teachers have to discuss their beliefs the more time they also would have to flesh out those beliefs. In addition, these one-on-one discussions about play would allow teacher educators to create a zone of proximal development in which preservice teachers could come to a greater understanding of their beliefs about play than they could on their own (Vygotsky, 1986). For instance, describing the influence of the interview on her beliefs Kate stated:

...having to verbalize my own opinions really makes me second guess myself.

When I looked at my transcript and actually had to differentiate between what was play and what wasn't play, and I couldn't figure out why I couldn't decide.

And, I think that that's just been the biggest thing (2007, Kate's member-check).

During these conversations, I asked the preservice teachers to make explicit connections among their beliefs about play in a manner unlikely to occur in an "everyday" setting, such as asking them to identify activities as play or not play and to explain the underlying reasons for their categorizations. For Kate, this process led her to realize that she felt comfortable identifying play activities, but she had troubling explaining why they were play. Instead of drawing on a general framework to define play, Kate identified play activities on a case by case basis. Thus, using this type of "assisted performance" (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996, p. 82) in university-based teacher education settings might encourage preservice teachers to further develop their beliefs about play.

Although engaging in one-on-one discussions with preservice teachers may assist teacher educators in surfacing and cultivating preservice teachers' beliefs about play, the time consuming nature of these discussions presents a practical challenge for teacher educators. For instance, during their individual interviews, I spent one hour each with 7 of the 13 preservice teachers in Dr. Ryan's course. In addition, it took me several hours to transcribe each of the preservice teacher's transcripts. In a smaller teacher education program, such as Hawkins University, a teacher educator might be able to handle these time constraints by replacing several university-based class sessions with periodic one-on-one meetings with students from their courses. While doing so limits contact time

with the entire class, these one-on-one meetings may provide information that teacher educators can use to create curriculum that effectively addresses preservice teachers' beliefs about play and provides a context for the preservice teachers to flesh out their beliefs with a more knowledgeable other.

### **CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Even though this study contributes to the field of early childhood teacher education by examining an issue that has gone largely unaddressed in research, namely preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs, the study itself has several limitations. Specifically, limitations include using self-reported data, applying a framework to my study after I had collected the data, and neglecting to have the preservice teachers make a clear connection between an individual belief about play, the specific influences on that particular belief and the specific manner in which an influence shaped that particular belief. First, although I made attempts to enhance this study's trustworthiness by triangulating my data and by engaging in member-checks with the participants, the data itself represents the preservice teachers' espoused beliefs about play. With this type of self-reported data "the validity of the information is contingent on the honesty of the respondent" (Mertens, 1998, p. 105). Accordingly, the trustworthiness of these findings reflects the extent to which the preservice teachers honestly expressed their beliefs about play during our one-one discussions, in Dr. Ryan's course, and in their written assignments. To account for the limitations arising from using self-reported data, future research on preservice teachers' beliefs about play might examine whether and how these beliefs guide a preservice teacher's practice during her field placement and internship experiences. In addition, future research might also incorporate external assessments by teacher educators and mentor teachers to further examine the veracity of the preservice teachers' espoused beliefs about play.

Second, even though using Vygotsky's (1986) framework along with Nespor's (1987) to describe, to analyze, and to interpret my data offered insights into the preservice teachers' beliefs about play that using Nespor's framework alone would not have offered, I applied Vygotsky's (1986) framework during the latter stages of the

study. Thus, his work helped frame the data analysis but not the data collection. Although it is not atypical for a study's conceptual framework to become "more sophisticated and (often greatly) modified" over time (Mertens, 1998, p. 50), applying Vygotsky's (1986) framework earlier in the study may have enhanced how I collected the data, such as asking questions to the preservice teachers during our interview that clearly connected with Vygotskian notions of conceptual development. For instance, because longitudinal research conducted over several years from preservice to inservice has been described as yielding the richest findings on changes in beliefs (Kagan, 1990; Pajares, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998), I chose not to include an examination of change as part of my research design. However, the fluctuations in the preservice teachers' beliefs, namely that they added to, refined, affirmed and changed how they defined play suggested that not only do preservice teachers' beliefs about play change, they may be in a constant state of motion. Accordingly, had I applied Vygotsky's (1986) framework up front, I would have geared the data collection process to account more clearly for this quality of conceptual development. Thus, future research might focus on using multiple frameworks throughout all stages of a study and not just during the data analysis stage.

Third, initially I had planned to focus on the prior experiences that had shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. However, based on interview data I found that the preservice teachers' descriptions of what had shaped their beliefs about play went beyond their previous experiences. Specifically, they also described feelings, ideals, and course-related experiences as influencing their beliefs. Therefore, I broadened and refined my initial research question. Although this line of questioning allowed me to examine how multiple influences had shaped their beliefs about play, I looked at the influences in terms of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play generally. I neglected to have the preservice teachers make a clear connection between an individual belief about play, the specific influences on that particular belief and the specific manner in which an influence shaped that particular belief. Accordingly, future research might examine how specific influences shape particular aspects of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play. Levin and He (2008) provide a potential model for this examination. Specifically, the 94 post-baccalaureate preservice teachers in their study were asked to describe their beliefs about

teaching and the source of *each* of those beliefs. Using this data the researchers developed a comprehensive “model of sources and content of preservice teachers’ beliefs” (p. 63), which allowed them to make direct connections between a particular aspect of the preservice teachers’ beliefs about teaching, the specific influences on that belief, and the manner in which those influences shaped that particular belief.

Beyond future areas of research designed to address the limitations of this study, the findings of this study suggest other avenues of research as well. First, although this study has taken a step toward understanding preservice teachers’ beliefs about play and the influences that shape their beliefs, it remains one of only two studies addressing this issue. Future research might continue to explore preservice teachers’ beliefs to determine whether and how the findings of this study compare to other contexts. For instance, researchers might consider conducting a large scale survey study that would allow them to collect information on beliefs about play from a broad range of preservice teachers in diverse types of teacher preparation programs (see *Survey Research* in Mertens, 1998).

Second, findings from this study indicated that the preservice teachers altered or added to their beliefs about play based on their classroom experiences. Accordingly, future research might examine more specifically the impact of teacher education on preservice teachers’ beliefs about play. In the short term, researchers might consider examining how particular teacher education coursework shapes preservice teachers’ beliefs about play. For instance, they could design a quasi-experimental study that measures the effectiveness of different types of teacher education coursework on beliefs about play of intact groups of preservice teachers (see *Quasi-experimental Designs* in Mertens, 1998), such as examining whether using one-on-one discussions to surface and to cultivate preservice teachers’ beliefs about play has a greater impact on their beliefs than courses that do not include those discussions. In the long term, researchers might consider creating longitudinal studies that examine the impact of university and field-based coursework on preservice teachers’ beliefs about play, how their beliefs about play manifest themselves in their practice during field-based and internship opportunities, how preservice teachers’ beliefs about play manifest themselves in their full time teaching practice, and whether and how their beliefs about and practice with play impact



children's learning and development. For instance, researchers might consider conducting longitudinal case studies of preservice teachers that espouse highly divergent beliefs about play upon entry to teacher preparation and then examine those beliefs overtime (see Yin, 2003).

Third, future research might explore preservice teachers' beliefs about play by using a broader lens to examine it. For instance, given the possible benefits of using multiple frameworks to explore preservice teachers' beliefs about play and the influences on those beliefs, researchers might use multiple frameworks across a range of definitions and conceptions of beliefs to frame their research. In addition, given the overlapping qualities of variation and contradiction embedded within *play* as a construct and *beliefs* as a form of cognition, future research might also examine which aspects of the preservice teachers' beliefs about play are related to the underlying qualities of their beliefs and which are related to the underlying qualities of play.

Play has an intricate role in early childhood education and uncovering preservice teachers' beliefs about play has been described as an important step towards effectively addressing play in teacher preparation (Klugman, 1996). In this regard, the findings of this study reveal challenges and opportunities for early childhood teacher educators. On the one hand, the multiple meanings, fluctuations, and contradictions present within the preservice teachers' beliefs about play highlight the challenges of defining and conceptualizing play within teacher education. On the other hand, the broad set of influences that shaped the preservice teachers' beliefs about play and their complex interrelationship suggest that by using multiple frameworks to explore preservice teachers' beliefs about play, by viewing preservice teachers' beliefs as an asset to their learning about it, by identifying the sources of preservice teachers' beliefs about play, and by engaging in one-on-one discussions with preservice teachers about their beliefs, teacher educators have the opportunity to address this complex element of early childhood education in their programs with the hopes of ultimately influencing their preservice teachers' practice. However, this study, as one of only two studies on preservice teachers' beliefs about play, is only a starting point. Additional research is

needed to supplement and expand this study's findings and to further assist teacher educators in supporting preservice teachers' learning about play.

## Appendix A: Self-Generated Items Categorized as Play, Not Play and Middle by the Preservice Teachers

The table is divided into three sections—*Items Categorized as Play*, *Items Categorized as Not Play*, and *Items Categorized as Middle*. Under each heading, I have listed the items that the preservice teachers placed in each category and I have used italics to indicate the actual language that they used during the interview. Where similar items were identified by more than one preservice teacher, I have grouped and labeled them, for example, “art-based activities” and “outdoor activities.” To the right of the activity, I have indicated the total number of preservice teachers who generated and placed an activity into a particular category. Finally, within each category, activities are listed in descending order from the most to least number of preservice teachers categorizing a particular item as play, not play, or middle.

<b>Items Categorized as Play</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Art-based Activities: Arts and Crafts; Art time; Activities for holidays</i>	n=4
<i>Free Play: Free Play, Free Time, Free Creative Playtime, Center choices, Playtime in centers</i>	n=4
<i>Outdoor Activities: Outside; Recess; Outdoor Play</i>	n=4
<i>Dramatic Play: Dress-up, Dramatic Play, Role playing</i>	n=2
<i>Dance</i>	n=2
<i>P.E.</i>	n=2
<i>Sharing/Show and Tell</i>	n=2
<i>Snacks, Lunchtime</i>	n=2
<i>Fun</i>	n=1
<i>Games</i>	n=1
<i>Looking around while in the hallway</i>	n=1
<i>Music</i>	n=1
<i>Naptime</i>	n=1
<i>Storytelling</i>	n=1
<i>Simple cooking</i>	n=1
<i>Touching “pestering” each other in the hallway</i>	n=1
<b>Items Categorized as Not Play</b>	
<i>Academics: Academics; (Math) Math, Basic Math, Numbers, Addition, Passage of time, Money sense, Counting to 100 by 1’s, 2’s, 5’s, 10’s, Calendar; (Literacy) Learn how to write; Get read stories; Reading; Phonemic Awareness; Reading Practice; Being read to as a class; Working with sight words; Reading time; Spelling; Handwriting; (Social Studies) Learning about cultures</i>	n=6
<i>Teacher-directed activities: Teacher conferencing (i.e. teacher working with reading groups); Teacher giving instructions, Carpet time, Assessment</i>	n=2
<i>Student Groups: Student group work (i.e. working together on a math worksheet); Groups (i.e. sitting with other students, but working independently);</i>	n=2
<i>Not enough time (i.e. not enough time allotted for play centers)</i>	n=1
<i>Hurt Feelings</i>	n=1
<i>Tattletaling</i>	n=1
<i>Structured and numbered play (i.e. qualities of classroom centers)</i>	n=1
<b>Items Categorized as Middle</b>	
<i>Centers, center activities</i>	n=5
<i>Art time</i>	n=1
<i>Beginning Writing Practice</i>	n=1
<i>Music</i>	n=1

<i>Puzzles</i>	n=1
<i>Reading in smaller groups by level</i>	n=1
<i>Science Experiments</i>	n=1
<i>Shapes (i.e. geometry activity involving art)</i>	n=1
<i>Songs that help kids learn</i>	n=1
<i>Talk</i>	n=1
<i>Working with manipulative</i>	n=1

## Appendix B: List of 52 Items Categorized as Play, Not Play and Middle by the Preservice Teachers

The table is divided into four columns, summarizes the list of 52 items that I gave to the preservice teachers. The first column lists the items that the preservice teachers were asked to categorize, and the three columns that follow indicate the total number of preservice teachers categorizing an item as play, middle, and not play respectively. The items are listed in descending order from the most to the least number of preservice teachers categorizing an activity as play. Items 1 through 7—*Play-Doh, water and sand table, traditional board games, dress-up clothes, pretending to be superhero, tag, kickball*—represent the seven items that all seven preservice teachers categorized as play. Items 42 through 52—*writing the ABC's, listening to the teacher read a story, reading independently, calendar time, math worksheets, listening to a book on tape, lining up, saying the "Pledge of Allegiance," asking for help or information, following directions, and zipping up your jacket*—represent the 11 items all seven preservice teachers categorized as not play. Items 8 through 41 represent the items that the preservice teachers categorized differently.

Item	Play	Middle	Not Play
1. Play-Doh	7	0	0
2. Water/sand table	7	0	0
3. Traditional board games	7	0	0
4. Dress-up clothes	7	0	0
5. Pretending to be a superhero	7	0	0
6. Kickball	7	0	0
7. Tag	7	0	0
8. Participating in cops and robbers where the participants pretend to shoot one another	6	1	0
9. Pretending to be a character from a violent R movie	6	1	0
10. Jigsaw puzzles	6	1	0
11. Art Center	6	0	1
12. House Center	6	0	1
13. Riding a tricycle in P.E.	6	0	1
14. Music Center	5	1	1
15. Math Games	5	0	2
16. While pretending to play school, the pretend teacher calls the pretend student "stupid" and the student begins to cry	5	0	2
17. Painting	4	2	1
18. Playing a musical instrument in Music class	4	1	2
19. Telling a classmate they cannot join a board game that's in progress	4	1	2
20. Games that teach children literacy skills	4	0	3
21. Pretending to be George Washington	4	0	3
22. Arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center	3	3	1
23. Dictating a story and acting it out as a class	3	1	3
24. Singing the ABC's	3	0	4
25. Eating lunch	3	0	4
26. Drawing a picture in Art class	2	2	3
27. Science Center	2	0	5

28. Feeding the classroom pet	2	0	5
29. Singing "You're a Grand Old Flag"	2	0	5
30. Creating a science experiment	1	2	4
31. Asking if you can have a turn on the swings	1	1	5
32. Talking with a classmate about a pair of scissors	1	0	6
33. Math Center	1	0	6
34. Figuring out how to join a group already busy w/an activity	0	2	5
35. Transitioning from one activity to another	0	1	6
36. Flashcards	0	1	6
37. Cleaning up the classroom	0	1	6
38. Reading Center	0	1	6
39. Writing Center	0	1	6
40. Writing a story	0	1	6
41. Cutting out magazine pictures that begin with the letter "B"	0	1	6
42. Writing the ABC's	0	0	7
43. Listening to the teacher read a story	0	0	7
44. Reading independently	0	0	7
45. Calendar time	0	0	7
46. Math worksheets	0	0	7
47. Listening to a book on tape	0	0	7
48. Lining up	0	0	7
49. Saying the "Pledge of Allegiance"	0	0	7
50. Asking for help or information	0	0	7
51. Following directions	0	0	7
52. Zipping up your jacket	0	0	7

## Appendix C: Kate's Categorized Activities List

The table summarizes the activities that Kate categorized a play, not play, and middle. The first set of activities represents the activities that Kate generated herself and then categorized. The second set of activities represents the 52 activities that I gave to the preservice teachers to categorize.

List	Play	Middle	Not Play
<b>Self-generated</b>	Arts/crafts Sharing/Show&Tell	Center Activities Shapes	Calendar/Days of the Week Numbers Reading time Spelling
<b>52 activities</b>	Art Center House center Math games Games that teach children literacy skills (e.g. rhyming words, letters, etc.) Traditional board games (e.g. <i>Chutes and Ladders</i> ) Water/sand table Play-Doh Jigsaw puzzles Dress-up clothes Tag Kickball Singing the ABC's Riding a tricycle in P.E. Playing musical instruments in Music class Pretending to be George Washington Pretending to be a superhero Pretending to be a character from a violent rated "R" movie Participating in "cops and robbers" where the participants pretend to shoot one another Singing "You're a Grand Old Flag" Arguing about who gets to be the baby in the house center While pretending to play school, the pretend teacher calls the pretend student "stupid" and the student begins to cry Telling a classmate they cannot join a board game that is already in progress	Music Center Flashcards Writing a story Dictating a story to a teacher and acting it out as a class Creating a science experiment Drawing a picture in Art class Painting Transitioning from one activity to another Cleaning up the classroom	Math Center Science Center Reading Center Writing center Calendar time Math worksheets Writing the ABC's Listening to the teacher read a story Reading independently Listening to a book on tape Cutting out pictures from a magazine of items that begin with the letter "B" (books, baseball, etc.) Eating lunch Lining up Saying the "Pledge of Allegiance" Zipping up your jacket Asking for help or information Following directions Feeding the classroom pet Talking with a classmate about a pair of scissors Asking if you can have a turn on the swings Figuring out how to join a group that's already busy with an activity

## **Appendix D: Hypothetical Kindergarten Schedule**

8:30-8:45	Arrival, Attendance, Announcements
8:45-9:15	Carpet time and Calendar
9:15-10:00	Math
10:00-10:45	P.E.
10:45-11:45	Reading/Writing
11:45-12:15	Lunch
12:15-12:30	Recess
12:30-1:00	Science
1:00-1:45	Specials (Library or Music)
1:45-2:15	Social Studies
2:15-2:45	Read Aloud/Wrap-up/Dismissal



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## Vita

Sara Anne Sauer Sherwood was born in Bellingham, Washington, on June 11, 1973. She is the daughter of Carol and John Sauer, the wife of Andrew Sherwood, and the mother of Charlotte Wilhelmina Sherwood. After graduating in 1991 from Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley, California, Sara attended Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas where she received a Bachelor of Arts in History and Humanities in 1995 and a Master of Arts in Teaching in 1996. After graduating from Trinity, Sara taught second grade at Henry Carroll Elementary in the San Antonio Independent School District. Following her first year of teaching, Sara taught for four years at Nancy Ryles Elementary in the Beaverton School District in Beaverton, Oregon. In 2001, Sara returned to San Antonio, Texas where for three years she served as the Certification, Accreditation, and Placement Officer in Trinity University's Department of Education. In the fall of 2003, Sara entered graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. While a graduate student, Sara served as an adjunct faculty member in Trinity University's Department of Education.

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