

Free Play: Through the Eyes of a Child
and Early Childhood Professional

by

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ABSTRACT

Via my personal, academic and professional journey, I closely examine my career growth and how my perspectives on early childhood environments developed in reference to free play. Using a narrative format, I share personal experiences that have shaped my views on free play. Free play is a type of play that features choices, freedom of selection, cognitive and social development, and child interest. I review relevant literature and weave in my personal and professional experiences in order to reflect on free play from two different perspectives: participant (child), and the Early Childhood Professional (teacher and/or administrator). I also demonstrate how my professional and academic milestones have contributed to my developing beliefs and ideas put into practice about free play in early childhood environments.

DEDICATION

For all the women in my life before me and after me; I travel the path you cleared for me and I am making it smoother for the women who will follow after me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to individually thank everyone who cheered me and even the ones who booed me; without the ones who said I could do it, I couldn't achieve this academic accomplishment. Mom, you are my role model and I learned everything I am today because I sat at your feet and watched your every step. The women took me under their wings and shared their journey and light in my life, I thank you: Beth Swadener, Carolyn Zifka, and Margo Dahlstrom. My partner in crime, who was always by my side, I love and thank you Myte Alleyne. To my father Michael Alleyne, without you, I would not be half the woman I am. You taught me how to love. To my Hispanic Partnership cohort and all my colleagues, I thank you because I learned that it is a lot easier to work with you all than to work by myself and a lot more fun too! Finally, but not the least, I give all honor to God who opens and closes doors in my life at just the right times.

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1	Educational Path History: Past And Future.....	28
2	Educational Path Current 2011.....	29
3	Innovative Play.....	54

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	List of Figures	iv
1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Vivid Memories of Play.....	1
	Play Theories.....	3
	Need for Study.....	9
	Use of Narrative Format.....	11
	Research Question.....	16
	My Personal Journey Stage.....	16
	The Childhood Experience.....	17
	Parental Value and Participation.....	18
	The Child Professional.....	20
2	THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD.....	25
	Home Values.....	25
	Extended Family.....	28
	Games We Play.....	29
	Preschool.....	31
	Caring for My Siblings.....	33
3	THROUGH THE EYES OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL.....	39
	Teacher's Perspective.....	39

CHAPTER		PAGE
	Coop Play.....	40
	So So Support.....	42
	My First Child Care Class.....	43
	Follow the Leader.....	48
	Director Dilemma.....	51
	Hiatus to Head Start.....	53
	Super Support.....	53
	Observing Free Play.....	57
4	CONCLUSION.....	60
	Free Play Implications	60
	Free Play Implications for Research and Educators.....	61
	Free Play Implications in The Classroom.....	62
	REFERENCES.....	65
	APPENDIX.....	68
	A A Pictorial Journey: From Childhood to Childhood Professional	69
	B Letter of Appreciation form my mom	78
	C Coop Feedback Document.....	80
	D Final Assignment: Philosophy, Autobiography & Analysis.....	85

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Vivid Memories of Play

My childhood was the starting point of my personal narrative journey and inquiry about free play and its' influence on early child development. During my own early childhood years, my most memorable life-learning experiences were had, when I was engaged in free play. These happy memories vividly play back in my mind as if they occurred just yesterday. When I reflect back on the play experiences I had as a young child, my heart smiles, my curiosity peaks, and I feel an internal need to create or produce something good.

Growing up, I had a partner in crime, my sister, who was less than a year my senior, making us almost alter ego twins. My sister and I were often occupied in symbolic play as children. Symbolic play is a stage developed in Piaget's deep structure analysis. "After the age of about two until about the age of four or five, children are primarily engaged in representational activities. But these activities move in two directions. One is toward conventional representations, concepts, verbal signs and the socialization of experience. The other is towards distorted representations, symbols and the expression of personal feelings, conflicts, etc." (Elkind, 1980, p. 286).

My sister and I yielded toward symbolic and representational play activities. As children, we often made use of any toy, including any materials (or make believe toys/props) we had access to. On one occasion, my sister and I

created an elaborate restaurant in our family garage. We pretended to cook on an old oven that was stored in the space, made menus with old office tablet paper my mother brought from work, and transformed a crate into an impromptu dining table. We then soaked tissue paper in pots filled with water to make colorful soup concoctions. After creating the restaurant, we alternated roles being the waitress and/or patron. My sister and I had the desire to carry out play activities mimicking real life situations we personally experienced or saw on television. Pat Broadhead states our play sufficiently in her article: *Developing an understanding of young children's learning through play: the place of observation, interaction and reflection*:

“Early years literature has long emphasized the value of a learning-teaching environment where children play and learn together in creative, investigative and problem-solving ways, where they can take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning and where their emotional and imaginative needs are met (*Isaacs, 1929; Hutt et al., 1989; Moyles 1989; Gura, 1992; Whitebread, 1996; Tyrell, 2001*); an environment where they can access a ‘thinking curriculum’ (*Nutbrown, 1994*) that allows them to develop their understanding of the world in conjunction with their own preoccupations, experiences and emerging schemata (*Athey, 1990; Nutbrown, 1994*). Essentially, this is an environment in which their own interests and strengths find voice and place within the planned curriculum and where they can take their intuitive ideas about the world around them

and, with scaffolding from adults and from peers, test them against other theories and possibilities” (Broadhead, 2006, p. 192).

Our pretend play usually involved my sister and I using materials in our environment and turning them into meaningful objects. “When engaging in pretend play, children use fantasy, make-believe, and symbolic behavior in representing one object as another (Fein, 1981). By incorporating fantasy into their play, children have an opportunity to understand their world by adding meaning to play objects that resemble the real-world counterparts and by expressing both positive and negative emotions as they experience their play materials (Kaugars, 2009); (Singer J. L., 1998).

Play Theories

Play is acknowledged as supporting intellectual development alongside social, emotional and physical development (*Garvey, 1991; Jordan & Le Metais, 1997; Pellegrini & Goldsmith, 2003; Robinson et al., 2003*). Classrooms that emphasize social competences also stimulate effective learning (*Morais & Rocha, 1999*). Children’s investigations, explorations and interactions are a crucial source of knowledge for educators in seeking to extend personal understanding of learning processes (*Jones, 2001*) (Broadhead, 2006, p. 192). Many theorists have described play and the purpose of play from their perspective. Friedrich Froebel was one of the early childhood pioneers and founding father of the term “Kindergarten” in America. In “*Gifts of Frederick Froebel*,” Stewart Wilson states that Froebel “established his philosophy of education on the idea that preliminary education should be based on natural play, whereby infant minds

could be canalized into paths of learning” (Wilson, 1967, p. 177). Based on Froebel’s ideas around play, children demonstrate what they know through play with “gifts” or toys. Play becomes “free play” when it is child initiated and the child’s interest are explored during play experiences. The key to genuine play is based on the interests and motivation of the child. Froebel believed that when play can be carried out based on a child’s interest, the foundation for learning occurs. “Froebel developed a systematic method, he understood learning as a process based on a method, with self activity at its center” (Baader, 2004, p. 78). Broadhead writes: Young children can also become skillful at marshalling and building their own scaffolding needs, in a suitably supportive learning environment (*Claxton & Carr, 2004*) (Broadhead, 2006, p. 192). These same senses and desires to create are activated when I “play” (e.g., work with creative freedom) even today as an adult.

My play today, although sometimes it actually involves a sandbox or dramatic play area, comes in the form of my professional work as an assessor. It is interesting to me as an adult and a professional, how my occupation today stimulates the same urges to question, explore and create something good, as it once did when I was a developing child. “Play is the highest phase of child development – of human development at this period. Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole - of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good ” (Manning, 2005, p. 54). Further, in an

article written by Maureen Jobe and Mary Zuzich, they define play in the following way:

“The term play is complex to define and, over the years it has been used in many different ways. A main problem with this term is that it can be defined broadly at times, and other times quite narrowly (*Zigler, Singer & Bishop-Josef, 2004*). For the purpose of this article, we use Johnson, Christie & Wardle’s definition (*2005*) of play as characterized by behavioral and motivational factors, including positive affect, non-literality, intrinsic motivation, process orientation, and free choice (Jobe & Zuzich, 2010, p. 7).

John Dewey, an American philosopher who advocated school reform in the 20th century also emphasized active hands on play that stimulated learning. “We cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand with real things and materials, with actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses. In all this there was a continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first hand contact with actualities. The educative forces of the domestic spinning and weaving, of the sawmill, the gristmill, the cooper shop and the blacksmith forge, were continuously operative (*Dewey, 1971, p. 11*)” (Polito, 2005).

Play can be seen as a way in which children make sense of their environment and learn how to participate within the environment. Jean Piaget, a

developmental psychologist is known for his extensive work in cognitive development theory. Piaget believed that children obtain knowledge through stages of development that incorporated repeated active investigation and experiences with objects. This idea of knowledge through activity is also a form of play. “Infants are active agents constructing their own worlds, and at the same time the physical and social contexts in which they act dynamically shape their constructions” (Fischer & Hencke, 1996, p. 203).

Maria Montessori was one the first female doctors in Italy, known for developing the “Montessori Method.” The Montessori Method is a style of teaching that emphasis children’s “work” in their development. Children’s interests are prioritized and the teacher’s role is primarily as the facilitator. Although some of Montessori’s teaching philosophy differs from what we traditionally see in U.S. preschools, the actual act of children’s hands on exploration of materials still fits into the category of play. Montessori approaches emphasizes children’s interest in activities executed in the classroom; this is a critical element necessary when defining free play. “Dr. Montessori viewed work as the tool through which children create themselves. In a Montessori classroom, work is defined as a meaningful activity freely chosen, in which effort must be made and learning new things takes place. However, it is not so difficult to frustrate the child or leave him discouraged. It is not unusual for the child engaged in her work in a Montessori classroom to fall into deep levels of concentration, appearing exceptionally contented, oblivious to what is going on

elsewhere in the classroom” (Haskins, 2010). From Montessori’s perspective, children’s work is essentially their play and how they best learn.

David Elkind, popular child psychologist, author of several books and articles on play and former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has long advocated for play to remain as one of the main methods used to facilitate child development. Elkind has authored several books that describe the purpose of play and how children’s play is evident in their cognitive development, social development, and even religious development. In *Play in Religious Education*, Elkind writes that, “In secular education, play prepares young people for societal change. In religious education, play can prepare young people for personal change and spiritual growth” (Elkind, 1980, p. 292). Elkind often draws connections between what children do in their everyday lives and how it translates into play. “The value of play in education, then, is that it teaches children not about the world and themselves per se, but rather about their own capacity for changing the world and themselves: When children present orally, write about their experiences, paint or sculpt their impressions or express their feeling through movement, they are learning not about the world but about their own capacity to transform and to re-present it. They come to recognize that their modes of verbalization and visual impressions are different from those of their peers. They learn not only about their own capacities for changing the world and themselves but also about the relativity of the reality in which they live” (Elkind, 1980, p. 290).

Although theories and ideas of what constitutes as play may vary by instructor or philosopher, we can still make some connections between the similarities and patterns by their logic. Play includes engagement, materials or role playing, and a purpose or a goal. What these specifically are can vary by theorist, but a child must engage in a play activity in order for it to occur, and regardless of their level of engagement, it must minimally happen in order for play to go on. Usually when children play they use materials or pretend to use materials. These materials can be tangible, or children pretend to have materials and role play, substituting the absent materials. The type of materials recommended for use during play, (body parts, natural objects or electronic devices) varies by theorist.

Finally, whether we agree on the purpose of play or not, play serves a purpose or goal. The purpose is known by the subject (the child) and when teacher or parent directed activities are implemented, the purpose or goal can be suggested or told to the child. Since play involves child engagement, we must accept that play has a purpose or goal, what that specific goal or purpose is, can ultimately only be determined by the individual actually playing. Kristen Kemple's book; *Let's Be Friends: Peer Competence and Social Inclusion in Early Childhood Programs*; suggest that there are six targeted social interaction skills present when children engage in "play time/social time," and they include:

1. Sharing – offering toys or materials to initiate peer play and interaction.
2. Persistence – maintaining efforts to initiate social interaction.

3. Requests to share – asking other children for help, to initiate play or interaction.
4. Play organizing – suggesting specific activities or themes to other children for play or interaction.
5. Agreeing – agreeing with others or offering positive responses to social initiations of others.
6. Helping – giving or requesting assistance to other children. (Kemple, 2004, p. 114)

Need for Study

Play has always been an interest of mine and I value play because of the long-lasting memories attached to play experiences I have had. Through the years, I have always wanted to attach play to everything I do in some way. This led me into the field of early childhood education. With a strong desire to use play as the main catalyst in my endeavors, it was only fitting to unveil the impact of play on my life from a child to an adult. In *The Power of Play*, Elkind summarizes a similar belief by Freidrich Schiller, “The idea that play is a basic, vital human disposition has long been recognized. Philosopher Friedrich Schiller regarded play as crucial to the human experience. For Schiller, play allows humans to realize their highest aspirations and ideals (Elkind, 2007). The natural act of play in some capacity has impacted and in some ways formatted the life choices I have made over my life span. Simply because we all have the right to a quality education here in America, and the future of our country, as well as the

world depends on the children we teach today; it is important that we constantly examine the process by which we both care for our children, and educate them. I believe that this mandates early childhood professionals to continuously reflect upon the professional and personal choices made while being the hands that rock the cradle.

Since the academic system we work in is always evolving, we should essentially be prepared to evolve and progress and become better able to serve the children we work with. For example, if your car is not functioning properly, you would not continue to operate the vehicle, in fear of a total breakdown, becoming immobile, and not being able to move forward at all. This same common sense notion should be applied to the early childhood field. If an approach you are using has stopped being effective and new problems are arising, there should be an immediate diagnostic or self inventory completed, which helps identify and fixes the problems in practice. This can be accomplished by writing personal narratives that help professionals in the field reflect on their journey. It will help them to identify where they are in their careers, identify ineffective approaches, and problems in practice. Afterwards the practitioner can develop a plan on how they want to “fix” these issues. In *What is “Good” Education Research?*, Karl Hostetler challenges researchers to reflect on the purpose and need of research and study in relation to its effects on human well-being. Hostetler says, “I propose that good research requires our careful, ongoing attention to questions of human well-being, and I urge education researchers to think about how to achieve the conditions under which that attention can flourish” (Hosteteler, 2005, p. 16).

Since there will always be issues regarding practices in early childhood education, the need for personal reflective narratives that examine those issues is necessary to bring attention to, and repair the issues identified in reference to our approaches in teaching.

Use of Narrative Format

Because no one can tell you why you made a decision or why you took the paths you have taken in life, I believe the best way for me to share the professional choices I have made, would be through a personal narrative. My journey from childhood to adulthood evokes a constant self-evaluation, in search of answers on the “hows and whys.” In a way, I am the test-subject, my goal is to find answers that will aide all mankind, especially those in the field of early childhood education. Understanding that the end result, the adult, is a direct product of the childhood experience; I am fascinated about how we can manipulate that time period and perhaps grow an improved crop if you will. It has led me to value and focus on certain aspects in quality childcare and identify dysfunctional practices in our institutionalized approaches. I guess you can call this quest, finding significance and purpose as expressed in Beth Blue Swadener’s book; *Decolonizing Research on Gender Disparity in Education*:

“The question of significance to me has primarily been a lifelong quest and an academic goal in this whole process. My research interest relates to gender disparity in educational access, persistence, and achievement at the secondary level in Niger. The purpose of the research was to identify state strategies and interventions in terms of policy, programs, and projects

that appear to improve girls' educational outcomes" (Swadener & Mutua, 2004).

Subsequently, my personal journey has impacted and transformed my teaching practices. A personal narrative can be described as, "One's theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers and researchers, storytellers and characters their own and other's stories. Therefore, there is perhaps no better way to put theory to practice than through one's own life experience" (Connely & Clandinin, 1990). I am presenting my thesis in narrative format to paint a personal yet relatable experience to readers. I believe my story will describe how I came to value play in early childhood programs, and how I my value of play was developed by mentors. The stories from my childhood, and professional life or career, are my design methods because they show which experiences molded my beliefs in play and quality early childhood care. Connely & Clandinin further state in their article: *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry*; "A number of different methods of data collection are possible as the researcher and practitioner work together in a collaborative relationship. Data can be in the form of field notes of the shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, other's observations, story-telling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures,

metaphors and personal philosophies. In our later discussion of plot of scene, the importance of the narrative whole is made clear. The sense of the whole is built from a rich data source with a focus on the concrete particularities of life that create powerful narrative telling (Connely & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5).

Berger states, “Storytelling is such an important activity because narratives help people to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes that call upon cultural modes of reasoning and representation” (Fraser, 2004). If only ones self can share what they have learned, the best way for me to share what I have learned is through personal narrative. By incorporating researched theories on play, the parents’ role in a child’s care and development, the role of teachers as the agents of professionalism in the development of early childhood prodigies; I am able to make connections between my personal growth experience and significant literature in the field. The ability to share a concise story that shows how higher levels of understanding were achieved would be the ultimate goal of personal narrative as research. “Researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings, and configure them into a story or stories. In other words, the aim is to discern a plot that unites and gives meaning to the elements in the data as contributions to a specific goal or purpose” (Ylijoki, 2001). In Thesis as Narrative or “What Is the Inquiry in Narrative Inquiry?” Conle describes the thesis development process of inquiry as follows:

Feelings and experience come together in the first step of any thesis work, that is, they come together in the motivation that generates initial involvement with a topic. Traditionally, we expect

this motivation to come from the inquirer's personal interests and expertise and, to a major extent, from the needs of the field, that is, from gaps in a body of knowledge that needs to be completed or expanded. In personal narrative inquiry, the body of knowledge to be explored is the writer's life. The motivation is therefore likely to come from the writer's interests, her expertise, as well as the particular life world that is her own. It is true that in narrative theses there is usually also a topic that gets explored through the narrative, for example, incarceration (*Mullen 1994*), literacy (*Bell 1991*), or acculturation. But the topic does not initiate the inquiry; it emerges in its initial stages and often gets modified as the writing proceeds (Conle, 2000).

Conle makes a significant point in this statement. Through my own personal journey, play inquiry began in my childhood and gradually became an area of interest for me throughout my personal and professional adult years, because it was valued by my family. Through personal narrative, my exploration of play and significance of play was intertwined with other elements that were also affected by play; such as parent involvement, preschool curriculums, administrative program rules in education, and professional development as it relates to approaches.

“Another data collection tool in narrative inquiry is the unstructured interview. Interviews are conducted between researcher and participant, transcripts are made, the meetings are made available for further

discussion, and they become part of the ongoing narrative record”
(Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5).

Since sharing stories and personal experiences will provide an intimate view of an individual’s life, I have included the experiences my siblings have had throughout their childhood as an additional contrast. This information was gathered via direct observation and present day interviews to extrapolate memories. My siblings’ and parents’ stories reflect another dynamic to the experiences I had growing up. I will further expand my understanding of their choices and perceptions to different real life situations, as I connect them to my theories about free play.

Finally, the narrative format allows me the researcher to be one with the data being collected and examined. Once again, Connelly and Clandinin explain the valuable nuance of the narrative format when they state:

Living the Story: Continuing the Process of Narrative Inquiry

What should be clear from the previous description is an understanding of the process as one in which we are continually trying to give an account of the multiple levels (which are temporally continuous and socially interactive) at which the inquiry proceeds. The central task is evident when it is grasped that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others. For the researcher, this is a portion of the complexity of narrative, because a life is also a matter of growth

toward an imagined future and, therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories (Connely & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

Research Question

In my personal narrative I will respond to the following research question: From my experience, how was free play facilitated, nurtured, and limited,? and what are the implications for my work in early childhood education. I will respond to this question from different experiences throughout my life; describing experiences from my childhood, professional career, and academic career that affected my perception and application of free play.

My Personal Journey Stages

My journey through play will be examined from three different perspectives; the childhood experience, the parents' values and participation, and that of the early childhood professional. Of course some of these stages overlap and coexist together. For example, although I am currently a Lead Assessor evaluating early childhood environments and program practices, my role as a teacher is still active. On alternate weekends with my church, I volunteer as a teacher in a program directed at closing the achievement gap of African, and African American students. Simultaneously, my parenting that is activated when my nieces (both pre-school age) come for a visit. These informal experiences are also teaching opportunities, just not in a structured classroom.

Four pillar perspectives of play will be introduced: child, parent, teacher and administrator (i.e., early childhood environmental evaluator). Since I had the opportunities to experience free play from all four different perspectives, I will attempt to paint a more accurate picture of the significance of free play in early childhood programs and identify factors that currently limit young children's opportunities to engage in free play. While not an empirical study, per se, I argue that my standpoint and experiences, coupled with critical reading of related literature by credible scholars on the subject, have all positioned me well for this analysis through narrative.

Childhood Experience

Naturally, my first experience with play started in my childhood, and therefore I will begin the revelations of my journey from that point. My childhood helped shape my views of play. The play in which I participated had no boundaries, and I felt capable and creative whenever I played. This creative and empowering freedom has long stayed with me, and I relentlessly yearn to replicate the same freedom of exploration in the classroom whenever I teach. I recall the bulk of the play activities I engaged in as a young child included lots of role playing and imitating. My mother recalls a time when my sister and I acted out pretending to be her and my father.

“I realized that the relationship I had with your father had become detrimental not only to myself, but to my off-spring, my family, when I began to notice you and your sister arguing about which one of you would play me, and which one would play your father. The riveting revelation

came after I watched the two of you settle on the parts you would play, and then went right into enacting out one of our horrid fights. I was so disturbed, but it became a wake-up call for me” (Christian T. , 2011).

Although what my mother saw was disturbing to her, this was a way my sister and I were making sense of what we saw around us. Kolb expands on Piaget’s theory around this type of play by saying, “Through an extensive observation of children’s play, *Piaget (1962)* contended that in early childhood, cognitive development occurred through two complementary processes of adaptation: imitation and play. Imitation would evolve into accommodation and play into assimilation at a later stage of cognitive development. For Piaget, play provides a rich context in which children interact with the environment and create their own knowledge about the world” (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). Everyone’s childhood play experience is different, this is rightfully so because we come from different home values where play is either encouraged or discouraged. So with that being said, I can only speak directly to my childhood play interactions that sculpt and contribute to my ideas around play practices in the classroom.

Parent Values and Participation

It is hard to debate that parents are not their child’s first teacher, if anything by default we can say that they are. Historically, parents and grandparents have been the primary teacher for young children. However, over time, and due to many circumstances, some of the responsibility of parenting has gradually shifted to other alternative agents, both by permission and omission, outside of the home institution. “In the United States, the dominant form of care

and education for young children (those under 7 years of age) has been care by their parents (primarily mothers), siblings, or other near relatives and caretakers within the home setting (Bloch M. N., 1980). The parent's impact on child's play is multifaceted. The level of which a parent plays with their own child can vary from home to home. In a home where children are expected to be "seen and not heard," direct parent involvement in child's play can be limited. However, with parents such as my own, who took a hands-on approach to play, instilling their values of play in me and teaching me how to navigate and learn from my environment while playing, the results are larger-than-life. My parents frequently took me and my older sister on several trips to community events including the children's theater (e.g., the Santa Monica Playhouse), and various plays given at local colleges, the local and university libraries, the La Brea Tar pits and other amazing museums such as the Science Museum and Natural History Museum, the Griffith Park Zoo and a plethora of beaches along the California coast to name just a few of our most popular family destinations. I in turn, inherited the same view my parents modeled in reference to free play.

The Childcare Professional

EDUCATION PATH HISTORY AND FUTURE

THE FUTURE:
"NEVER STOP LEARNING"
I AM CURRENTLY ENROLLED AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY IN THE MARY LOU FULTON COLLEGE OF EDUCATION IN PROCESS OF OBTAINING MY BAE IN EARLY EDUCATION WITH MY INITIAL TEACHING CERTIFICATION – FOLLOWING COMPLETION I PLAN ON EXCELING TO MY MASTERS THEN DOCTRINE IN EDUCATION

PHOENIX COLLEGE
AAS DEGREE
CHILD CARE ADMINISTRATION

**COUNCIL FOR PROFESSIONAL
RECOGNITION**
CHILD DEVELOPMENT
ASSOCIATE CREDENTIALS

PHOENIX COLLEGE
FAMILY SUPPRT CERTIFICATE

STATE OF ARIZONA
DES TRAINING AND
CERTIFICATION

Fig.1. Educational Path History and Past

The academic journey of a million classes, began with charting a vision for myself.

Educational Path Current 2011

YEAR	EDUCATION	JOB
1997	Cactus High School COOP	COOP after-school teacher
1998	Not Enrolled	Kinder Care Learning Center – 6835 W Peoria, 623-486-0268
1999	Not Enrolled	Children’s World Learning Center – 6810 W Thunderbird, 623-486-0492
2000	Not Enrolled	American Child Care – 8515 N 51 st Ave, 623-931-5911
2000	Not Enrolled	May 2000 to February 2003: Teacher – Peoria Avenue Pre School– 8815 W Peoria 623-878-8035
2004	Phoenix College – Child Care Administration Degree	May 2003 –February 2005: Director – Peoria Avenue Pre School – 8815 W Peoria 623-878-8035
	Arizona State University	March 2008 – November 2008: Student Teacher – William T. Machan Elementary School
	Arizona State University	August 2005 – February 2009: Head Start Child Development Specialist & Center Director Southwest Human Development
	Arizona State University	February 2009 – June 2011: Quality First Lead Assessor! AZ First Things First – Southwest Human Development
2011		July 2011 - Kindergarten Teacher – Loma Linda Elementary School

Fig. 2. Educational Path Current 2011

In comparison, on the first vision chart, I misspelled, and didn't even have the correct advisement to chart a path for myself. In the second chart, I am able to reflect on what was necessary, and then smile with pride at what I achieved.

As a child, we go through stages, infant to toddler then to preschooler. In the same aspect, as a teacher, I went through the same stages in my teaching career. As a beginning teacher, I was limited to my environment, constantly in survival mode, never allowed to fully blossom and grow, lacking the professional development, formal education and learning strategies to apply developmentally appropriate practice. These stressors ultimately took a toll on my physical, mental and emotional states, hindering my ability to effectively teach. In the article *Preschool Teachers Experience of Stress*, “In order to understand teacher stress, researchers have sought to identify the major sources. Common stressors of work overload, time restraints, problems with child behavior, working conditions, relationships with colleagues, lack of resources, and the physical demands of teaching have been identified repeatedly by researchers” (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995). I started as a beginner teacher and with mentor support, educational resources made accessible; I developed into an inspired teacher, as defined by Carole Steele in her book: *Inspired Teacher*. Steele describes an inspired teacher as having two characteristics, “First, inspired teachers have absorbed and developed a large body of knowledge about their subject and about teaching well. They have mastered this information and use it effectively with ease. Second, they take inspiration from their students; every student reaction is a subtle signal used to mold more effective instruction” (Steele, 2009).

My current position as a program administrator, or assessor allows me to candidly observe play in a wide range of classrooms statewide. This opportunity is unique in that it has afforded me with multiple observational advantages by

which to compare play opportunities in a variety of early childhood settings. In addition to being able to identify patterned problems in practice, as an Assessor, I evaluate programs with the widely used tool called the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS). Although, not all agree with certain components of the scales, most early childhood professionals would probably agree on the basis of the scale (caring for our children and developmentally appropriate practice guidelines). In the position of a lead assessor, I assess programs on the typical experience of a child's day. This opportunity immediately began to surface some of the positive and negative childhood experiences I succumbed to, together with those of my siblings. From an "outsider," or the assessor's point of view, with lots of experience in early childhood education by this point, I am able to pin point some problems in practice that hindered play opportunities. During my assessments, I saw myself in the teacher I was observing. She was going through the same chaos I went through when I was a novice. In some assessments, I saw real intentional practices to incorporate play as a basis for learning, From an Assessor's stand point, I came full circle with my journey of play and being able to see other children, parents and staff at different stages along this spectrum, and it made me further question my personal journey and effectiveness. I saw things that I formerly practiced, that I would never do today. In addition, I observed different approaches to play that I would consider putting into my own professional toolbox.

A primary and well documented element of quality child care is a quality and/or highly trained early educator. In my case growing up, the teacher I still recall was Ms. Daily. To suggest that one element is key to creating quality in an early childhood program would not be logical. If quality was easily achieved, it would be more prevalent in centers not only in Arizona, but across the U.S. Opportunities for children to play would be minimal without materials for children to play with or peers for children to interact with. Elkind describes kinship play as an opportunity for children to build on their social emotional relationship with other like individuals. “Children of about the same age and size are naturally drawn to one another. They share a common pint-size view of the world, a common subordination to adult authority, and a common wish to relate to someone like themselves.” “Kinship play is an initiation into social learning and cooperative activities” (Elkind, 2007).

In her journal, *Preschool Teachers’ Shared Beliefs About Appropriate Pedagogy for 4-Year-Olds*, Joon Sun Lee states that “according to the few existing studies on early childhood teachers’ beliefs, preschool teachers appeared to hold ECE’s time honored tradition to prioritizing social, emotional, and physical development over academic learning.” (*Browning, 1997; Caruso, Dunn, & File, 1992; Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwiz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989; Piotrowkoski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000; West, Hausken, & Collins, 1993*) and of endorsing child related practices rather than teacher-directed practices (*Mc Mullen et al., 2005; Stipek & Byler, 1997*). These can also be categorized as developmentally appropriate practices (Lee, 2006).

CHAPTER 2

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

Home Values

I come from a large family, but initially for seven years my family was small: it consisted of my older sister Myte, my mother Teresa and father Michael. My sister is 15 months older than me and we are very close like twins. My sister and I often engaged in elaborate play; mostly dramatic play types of games. We reenacted things we saw in the world and used any and everything as props. My mother recalls a time when she watched me and my sister role play, pretending to be the Smurfs:

I can recall many, many times of you and your sister role playing various people, either your father and myself, or the teachers and students at the preschool. I even recall you guys playing characters from the TV, like the time you were playing a scene from the Smurfs. One of you played Papa Smurf, and the other was the girl Smurf, I think it was your sister. As Papa Smurf, you called out to her, and assured her that you were on your way to rescue her. She yelled from a closet, “over here Papa Smurf, help, help!” I recall laughing at the serious look that came over your face as you took off to rescue the girl Smurf (Christian T. , 2011).

My mother allowed my sister and me great freedom to create and play, and as well did our grandmother. Our grandmother would allow us the most freedom to build tents and hiding places with furniture, boxes, blankets and sheets. My father also allowed my sister and me to play freely. Often the play my father encouraged

was recreational. I recall frequenting Hollywood Park, a horse race track, and playing for hours on the playground with my sister and many other children, whose parents were preoccupied with placing their bets. My sister and I quickly learned how to socialize with other children. Somehow we knew which kids could actually bring us harm, based on their participation in risky activities like leaping off of swings mid-air, the sort of things we were not allowed to do at home. My father was nearby, watching from an above ramp that framed the playground. My father frequently took us to Griffith Park where we would race each other, roll around in the grass, and ride the train. My sister and I never spent a weekend with our father when we did not go to the Mc Donald's Playland. My mother was into the arts and often planned day trips to the various museums or a children's theater for us to "gain exposure" as she would say. The trips my mother planned allowed play opportunities but, more so, prepared us for future play and exploration. One Saturday morning, my mom packed me and my sister up and we caught a few busses across Los Angeles and arrived at the Santa Monica Playhouse. My mother introduced my sister and me to live theatre that morning and we were inspired by the performance of Alice in Wonderland. Later on that day, my sister and I put on an impromptu play for the children in our neighborhood using sheets and clotheslines for curtains and props from our house to act out our production. My parent's actions instilled a strong value of play in me and it also showed me how much they cared about us. David Elkind advocates regular "family time." "When we make a sacrifice, when we give up something that is important to us in order to be with our children, we give them

something that is invaluable, the assurance that they are important in our lives and that we care about them deeply. If children are secure in this feeling, we have given them the best preparation we can to cope with anything life throws at them later” (Elkind, 2007). I knew that play was something that my parents valued and made time for. I knew that play was a time of exploration, creativity and bonding. By their actions, my parents taught me that learning occurred through play. This is something that I inherited from them and value to this day.

My parents demonstrated that play should be a regular practice and should be used as a way to explore and learn about the world. These practices are also referred to as funds of knowledge. “Funds of knowledge refers to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (e.g., skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household’s functioning and well-being (for details, see *Greenberg, 1989; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992*)” (Gonzalez, et al., 1993). These play times my parents regularly initiated with me and my sister were more than ways to expend energy and time. During our adventures in the city with my mom, my sister and I learned how to navigate around a metropolitan area. My mother did not always have a car, or lots of money, but she was personally bent on not allowing our economic circumstances to limit our academic and social development. We learned how to read bus routes, when to ring the bell to alert the bus driver to stop and how to time our visits with the expiration time on the bus transfer. Both my parents emphasized maximizing events and activities that were either free or inexpensive. This was essential for our survival at the time because my father had been laid off from his

employer and my mother was taking care of the bills on her own. We went to the beach, Griffith Park and the Mc Donalds' Playland with my dad so frequently, because they were free. My dad had such child-like charm, hanging with him was like a day at the circus no matter where we went. My mother would get the free circular newspapers and search for free or low cost activities that we could attend. But, no matter what our financial situation, my parents prioritized play time.

Extended Family Play Experiences

My maternal grandmother, Mum Mum as we called her (Janet Brown) also encouraged me and my sister to play, specifically outdoors. She loved to garden, and in order to supervise us, she would mandate that we come outside with her while she hung out the laundry, tended to mulch, or fussed with her many plants. My Mum Mum helped provide care for me and my sister from birth through approximately 12 years of age. The perimeter of my Mum Mum's house was framed with plants, flowers and foliage. Mum Mum was a gardener and she spent much of her days pruning, watering her crops and, selling Avon. She freshly picked her herbs and spices from various areas of the yard and used them in her expert Louisiana dishes. Whenever my sister and I would express feeling bored, My Mum Mum would immediately find sheers or any other gardening tools and instruct us to tend to the garden. My sister and I liked this type of labor but were more attracted to fantasy or dramatic play. One day, after pruning the garden and pulling weeds, my sister and I decided to create a stand in the front yard to sale produce, plastic bead jewelry and whatever else we could scavenger up. My sister and I were replicating the funds of knowledge or values that my

grandmother believed to be important. My grandmother valued agriculture; she cooked with natural ingredients and used plants for medicinal purposes. If I scraped my knee, my Mum Mum would break off a piece of aloe vera and rub its extract on my wound. My Mum Mum also found alternative ways to supplement her fixed income by selling Avon. In our play, my sister and I mimicked what we saw our Mum Mum doing day to day. My Mum Mum's resourcefulness is replicated in my actions today as an adult, but this trait was initially planted in me by play activities my Mum Mum encouraged. In, *Supporting Preschoolers' Social Development in School Through Funds of Knowledge*, Mari Ojas and Belinda Flores proclaims, however, that there are common goals that many parents across cultures have for their children including 'physical survival, economic self maintenance, and realization of cultural values, including the shaping of behavior' (Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009, p. 56).

Games We Play

I recall playing more board and card games with my mother and my sister I got older. I can also recall the impact on the games I played with other family members. My paternal grandmother, "Nanna," preferred card games, and specifically Gin Rummy. In teaching us the game of Gin Rummy, she would first brutally beat us as inexperienced rookies to the game. The defeats taught us how to quickly learn strategy skills, and we swiftly became better players at the game. My mother was also big on word games. I remember watching my mother work on crossword puzzles and a variety of word games in one of those game magazines. My mom often gathered me and my older sister to play Boggle and

her favorite game, Scrabble. Sometimes, the game would create some intense debates about the existence of words, and would trigger a “challenge.” If a word was challenged, the person who questioned the words existence would look the word up in the dictionary to see if it existed; if it didn’t the person who played the word would lose their turn. My mom valued literacy skills, she wrote daily in a journal, frequently played word games in a crossword puzzle book, and read a Beatrix Potter or E.B. White book to us every night before we went to bed. The funds of knowledge or values my mother instilled in us were connected to the importance of reading, writing and an education. As a result, my sister became a heavy reader and I became a teacher. Because my mother at the time was a college student majoring in child development, she was almost certainly intentionally teaching her values about literacy through her game selection. Boggle and Scrabble both being games that allow players to demonstrate and apply their literacy skills. My mother also introduced my sister and I to a game of skill her mother taught her called “Pick Up Sticks.” The point of the game was to drop a bunch of sticks slightly bigger than tooth picks, their length a little longer than pencils, from approximately a foot in the air. Afterwards, we would alternate taking turns picking up one stick at a time, without moving or disturbing the other sticks. The challenge increased as you moved toward the nucleus of the pile of sticks. Fine motor use has often been connected to intelligence and brain development. “Montessori discovered the role of the child’s hand in developing intelligence by intuitive observation. She then took this discovery to its logical conclusion by emphasizing the importance of the hand as an educational tool.”

(Lillard, 1997) In Lillard's book, *Pick Up Sticks* would be considered more than a game to pass time, in order to play the game, you had to use fine motor skills, logic and reasoning skills and careful eye hand coordination. These types of skills are often embedded in play and strengthen along with how challenging the play becomes.

Preschool

My own childhood journey through free play took place in preschool. This was another significant time that molded my perception of free play in a formal early childhood setting. At first, being dropped off in a strange place was very hard for me to accept and grasp the concept as a child. I was that child that was trying to keep it together, but once my mom let go of my hand, I fell to pieces. Fortunately for me, I usually had my sister nearby who was strong and did not cry, which helped calm me down. However, since we were different ages, we were often separated. The main teacher that helped me relax was Ms. Dailey. Ms. Dailey had bright yellow skin, thick framed glasses, and a sunny child-like smile on her face all the time. Ms. Dailey allowed me to orbit around her until I was ready to venture off and engage in play opportunities with my peers. Ms. Dailey always made me smile by telling me a joke, making a silly face, or by speaking in a funny voice. To help me become engaged in play activities, Ms. Dailey would start to model play. I remember one time when Ms. Dailey went into the dramatic play area and started to clunk around with the dishes and plastic foods. Ms. Dailey made me a plate of food then took on the role as cook, asking me if I

wanted anything else. This amused me and helped me see play modeled and it also helped me get my mind off my mother leaving.

In A Piaget primer: *How a Child Thinks*, Singer & Revenson state the following about play; “An adult who is playful with a child is also sanctioning normal play that some children may feel reluctant to engage in for fear of laughter or ridicule by their peers” (Singer & Revenson, 1996). My sister was my only peer, and I did not know how to engage in play with other children. Strange as it was, I was painfully shy. Yet, when I saw Ms. Dailey initiate play, this encouraged me to engage in play as well. There were similarities between my mother and Ms. Dailey’s teaching approaches, methods and style. The teacher’s role was important and I find it ironic how much I remember about Ms. Dailey compared to other teachers I had, even my more recent High School teachers. Ms. Dailey was an example of quality in early child care. She was the example of a nurturer and she knew I needed to feel safe before I could grow and play. I can link my love for brussel sprouts to Ms. Dailey. At lunch time, we sat family style, Ms. Dailey at the head of the table. Ms. Dailey encouraged us to try brussel sprouts and grinned when I did. To this day, it’s my favorite vegetable. I can still hear and see Ms. Dailey lifting her cup of milk at lunch, then all of us children doing the same, and she would say “Cheers honey baby!” and all of us children would repeat her actions. I credit Ms. Dailey with helping me learn how to engage in play in the early childhood classroom. In Ron Clark’s; *The Excellent 11: Qualities Teachers and Parents Use to Motivate, Inspire and Educate Children*, he describes the importance of teacher enthusiasm with a purpose. “It’s

one thing to have a lot of energy, and it's another thing to use that spirit and attitude to make a difference" (Clarks, 2004). Ms. Dailey's methods to help me calm down, coupled with the use of playful dialogue was intentional and successful.

Caring for my Siblings

My home life included many typical dysfunctions in family structures, perhaps generic to single-head of household, and for families of lower economic status, even specific to African American families. Marie-Anne Suizzo research purports the following:

Studies of African American parents' goals and values for children have shown that, like Asian and Latino parents, they highly value family and kinship networks (*Hill & Sprague, 1999; McAdoo, 2002b*). Children are taught to fulfill their obligations toward their family through reciprocal helping behaviors (*McWright, 2002*). Religion and spirituality are also consistently found to be extremely important cultural values among African Americans (*Spencer, 1990; Thomas, 2000; C. H. Thornton, 2004*). The legacy of slavery and "unrelenting racism and discrimination" (*McAdoo, 2002c, p. 48*) faced by African Americans in the United States has affected how these parents prepare children for adulthood (*Peters, 2002*). Racial socialization, teaching children about their identity as members of their ethnic or racial group, is practiced by about two thirds of African American parents (*Murray & Mandara, 2002; M. C. Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990*). Racial socialization is a multidimensional process emphasizing both the collectivism values of politeness, equality, group

loyalty, and ethnic pride, and the individualism values of achievement, self-respect, and self-confidence (Peters, 2002) (Suizzo, 2007).

In other words, because my father was no longer a part of my family, and my family was growing, I took on a new identity as my younger siblings began to arrive; I became a “helper.” The dynamics of my family changed from just my mom and older sister, to now my mom, older sister and three new siblings; two boys and a baby girl. The addition of my younger siblings caused me to take on a new role. In all reality, you might say the funds of knowledge was in practice at this time, as I evolved into my mother’s significant other as it applied to the role of parent. In their article; *Supporting Preschoolers’ Social Development in School Through Funds of Knowledge*, Mari Riojas-Cortez and Belinda Bustos Flores state the following:

“Socialization practices influence the young child’s social development. In the early childhood classroom, respecting others, sharing and working cooperatively are seen as prosocial behaviors and are considered to be learning-related skills (McClelland and Morrison, 2003). Several researchers also suggest that these skills are linked to academic achievement (McClelland and Morrison, 2003; Porath, 2003).

McClelland and Morrison indicate that learning-related skills are evident in children as young as three to four years of age and are stable over time. Although research supports the importance of child rearing socialization practices, minority children’s socialization skills tend to be measured against the majority culture, often ignoring the values and goals of the

family. *Delgado-Gaitán (1994)* proclaims, however, that there are common goals that many parents across cultures have for their children including ‘physical survival, economic self-maintenance, and realization of cultural values, including the shaping of behavior’ (p. 56). *Heath (1999)*, in her classical study, discusses the different ways that families from two different communities use language to convey values and beliefs to children and one another. Further, minority children’s development is studied without considering how the acculturation process – adopting the dominant culture’s practices – impacts family life and ways of being. While some individuals or families feel compelled to fully assimilate to the majority culture, others consider the importance of maintaining the heritage group culture” (Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009, p. 186).

I became my mother’s hand maiden of a sort, my mom use to say I was like Moses’ sister when he was found in a basket on the Nile River. She often praised me for being such an essential helper to her with the additional children. My younger siblings taught me how to care for newborns and preschoolers, and to love and have compassion for that age group. I literally provided care for my siblings, above and beyond the typical duties of an elder sibling. Some would even say I adopted some parental responsibilities almost by default due to our family configuration. When I was seven years old, my mother gave birth to the first boy in our family; Enoch Christian, in 1985. I often highlight his entry into the world as the time when I realized I had a calling to be a teacher. I cared so much for my baby brother, I had a natural instinct to care and make things as

comfortable as I could for him. In 1985, 1987 and 1990, my mother gave birth to three more children, each one of them experiencing a uniquely different child care experience. I provided a significant amount of care for my younger siblings, as my mother had to work, and often worked over time to support our family. While my mom worked, I took care of the house and my siblings, and my mom recalls those days:

“Teja was intuitive when it came to helping out with her siblings. I could trust her instinctively to help me keep it together, even more than her older sister, Myte. She was not only mature for her young years, but she had a compassion and passion for the care of the new babies. And as she grew up, she became more proficient. I remember how Teja would read my text books on child care, and one day she came to me after the birth of my first son and said “Mom, Enoch is okay, he is not retarded, and I did the babinski test on him.” I had to laugh out loud, and I said to her; “ thank you sweetheart, I am so thankful to God for you and your help. One day you will become a pediatrician I bet.” She continued to be a strong arm of assistance to me, when the children would do wrong, I would tell them to be careful before I give Teja the right to exercise judgment, and they all knew what that meant. Today, I can see where some of her assistance may have been a bit of an overload in retrospect for a child of her age, but at the time her help was so necessary, and she seemed to enjoy it so much. As a parent, I think it worked to keep her from idle time as a teenager (i.e., no time to become a teenage pregnancy). Today, I can see how all of the

hands on practices have made her an “expert” with children, and I hope she gives me credit for this, [laughs].” (Christian T. , 2011).

My mom gave me specific instructions as to what my responsibilities were when caring for my siblings. I was in charge of my sibling’s routine care (diapering, meal preparation etc.) and play activities within my mother’s rules. If my mom was not home, we could not go outside, so we played indoors. My brothers usually were involved in active gross motor dramatic play activities; pretending to be super heroes, kicking, running, jumping and thumping. Since I was responsible for their safety, I recall being an authoritative child care provider, and perhaps following some of the more punitive values modeled by my mother.

“(African Americans reported harsher discipline), especially among low-income parents. African American mothers have reported greater use of physical discipline than do European American mothers (*Deater-Deckard et al., 1996*). African American parents also have displayed more punitive attitudes toward their children (*e.g., Reis, Barbera-Stein, & Bennett, 1986*). How parents think about physical or severe discipline and its purpose as a socialization strategy may differ for African Americans and European Americans (*e.g., Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Garcia Coll, 1990; Jackson, 1997; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Ogbu, 1981*). (Pinderhughes, et. al. Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000).

Because of my age and inexperience, I used what was subsequently effective and immediately stopped the aggressive play, and that was usually via threats and bribes. “Aggressive behavior by children in preschool and early elementary school tends to evoke negative parent emotions and cognitions, which lead to more negative parenting behaviors” (Hastings & Rubin, 1999). The play my younger brothers engaged in served the same purpose as the play my older sister and I engaged in, however, their approach was dramatically different. The boys enjoyed more physical play, and the youngest, Aericka, enjoyed the movie, The Lion King. Here is a brief interview with my brother, Eli.

Eli: “When I would come home, I knew most of the time, my mom would not be there, and she would be working late. I would look to my big sister Teja, she always had things in order. I often resented her telling me to do my homework first, but I knew she was following my mother’s orders. She would often help me with my homework. Afterwards, I was always glad that she would be cooking dinner, she was a much better cook than my mom. I can remember my sister Teja being hard on my brother Enoch, he was a little harder to control. He felt he could do his own thing and often disrespected my sister because she was not my mom. Teja however was not to be ignored or disrespected; she would quickly get things under control, even Enoch. In addition, she would engage us in free play, and allow us to play super hero games.”

(Christian E. , 2011)

CHAPTER 3

THROUGH THE EYES OF A EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL

Teacher's Perspective

The first time I taught young children in a preschool classroom was during my senior year of high school. Seniors were able to select from a reserved group of elective classes that were occupational based and designed specifically for student preparation to enter into the work force and/or next academic advent. I requested to join the Cactus High School Coop program. Coop was an on campus child care center that was for children of staff. Each year, a group of seniors were selected to be novice teachers in the Coop program. In Coop, I was able to teach in a way that was fun and exciting for me and the children. Of course, I was still learning a lot about developmentally appropriate practices in structured preschool settings, but this was done in a very supportive way. The program Director mentored me and was always nearby during instructional activities. Mentoring was defined by Henry, Stockdate, Hall, and Deniston (1994) “as a caring and supportive interpersonal relationship between an experienced, more knowledgeable practitioner (mentor) and a less experienced, less knowledgeable individual (protégé or mentee) in which the protégé receives career-related and personal benefits” (*as cited in Gallacher, 1997, p. 196*) (McCormick & Brennan, 2001).

Mrs. Naylor was an excellent mentor teacher, she stepped back and allowed me and other beginning teachers to lead instruction of activities and

implement curriculum in the classroom. After instruction periods, Mrs. Naylor and my peers provided feedback through verbal and written responses. Mrs. Naylor was delicate and supportive when providing feedback. Each day, I attended a prep class period before I actually taught the children during another class period. During the prep period, I was able to develop developmentally appropriate activities with other students and an expert teacher. When it was time to implement activities, the classroom ratios were approximately 1:3 and the primary focus was children's engagement and activity implementation.

Coop Play

One of the main components accentuated in COOP was the act of play. Mrs. Naylor mentored me and other novice teachers and helped us develop and implement activities during natural play settings that naturally occurred in the classroom. The classroom was arranged for play activities and there were very little structured whole group sessions. When we developed activities to implement in the classroom, they were to occur during natural play times, and children joined in teacher directed activities as they became interested. Children's choice is listed as one of the shared beliefs in preschool teacher's pedagogy. "It was important for the majority of the teachers (83%) whether or not children chose to do what they wanted to do, as opposed to teachers imposing upon children what to do. For these teachers, it was very important that young children were given freedom of choice as illustrated in the teacher's comment below:

‘Children have to be able to choose. If only one of us could choose, I would let them choose... It doesn’t all have to be top-down: “I’m the grownup; I’ll tell you what to do,” you know.

They have to have power too (Teacher #13)’ “ (Lee, 2006, p. 436).

Although my experience in COOP was supportive and beneficial, it did not prepare me for what I would experience post High School. My experience in COOP helped develop my understanding of free play and how it is to be used as a way to facilitate what children learn in the classroom. My experience in COOP also helped develop my values and ideas of appropriate free play. I anticipated leaving high school, going into the early childhood field and applying my learned play theories and approaches.

My sister Aericka, the youngest child, was also enrolled in Cactus Coop when she was four years old. Here is an interview with Aericka:

“While a child in Cactus Coop, I was very excited to have my big sister as one of the teacher aides. It made me feel important, and special. I could go to her for assistance, and get special attention over the rest of the children. I had a special bond with Teja, because I had always heard that she asked my mom to have another baby, and that baby was me. She always made me feel special and safe, and while in Coop we would play. I enjoyed play time with her because she would allow me to express myself during play. I would always role play, and be her mom during dramatic play. She would allow me and act like a baby, a bad

baby, lol. I would give her a bath, comb her hair, and change her clothes, just like she did for me at home. Seeing her there gave me hope, and inspired me to play with the toys, games, and other children (Christian A. , 2011).

So-So Support

After graduating from high school, everything did not go as I planned. My older sister applied to ASU and was admitted with a theater scholarship. I was under the impression, that I would have a similar experience when it was my time to obtain a higher education. However, I was not accepted into ASU and I was not prepared for this rejection, and it set me back emotionally. Initially, my self-esteem was destroyed by the denial and I did not have a backup plan. I had no connections in the early childhood field or any connections to peers who were in the field. I had no college fund that was saved up for me and I was uncertain as to what I would do next. “Research also shows that among educators, preschool teachers themselves also comprise a “high-need” population. While there is as much danger of ‘*essentializing*’ preschool teachers as there are children, many preschool teachers without credentials fit the description of nontraditional students. Higher education systems are ill-equipped to assist these students who commonly face obstacles to degree completion such as competing work or family responsibilities, a lack of academic preparation, being a first-generation college student, and lacking funding and financial aid” (Ciyer A. e., Nagasawa, Swadener, & and Patet, 2010). This was exactly the position I was in, continuing my education was not the available path for me due to similar circumstances. I

knew I had a wealth of knowledge and a strong desire for a higher education, but the rejection was too much for me to accept at the time. After a brief hiatus from school, I entered into the workforce. I started working at a corporate preschool that was near my home. I intended to bring the valuable experiences I was taught in COOP to the classroom. However, this was not to be the case whatsoever.

My First Child Care Class

I was eager to work in a child care and apply everything I had learned about play during my childhood, during the upbringing of my siblings, and as a teacher in Coop. My first classroom space was unique and unlike any class I have ever had since. The physical layout of the class was a challenge in itself; when you entered the center, you entered into my classroom and the front office was located within the same space. Throughout the day, there were constant distractions and interruptions that disturbed the life of my class. School-agers were constantly going through my room to catch the bus, parents came in waves early in the morning and in the evenings to pick up their children, and staff traffic was constant. The director often asked me to be mindful of the children's sound level, because of her office proximity. In addition to the physical issues with the classroom, I had even bigger challenges with the actual personalities in my classroom.

My class was all boys, between the ages of three and five years old. The boys were naturally very physically active and frequently chased each other around the classroom during transition times. In addition, the boys would

frequently get into physical fights. I was having flashbacks of caring for my younger brothers, so I resorted back to what I knew would yield immediate results. Bribes and threats, I used candy, toys, and the threat of losing outdoor play time to maintain order. This ineffective approach only gave me a few minutes of peace before all hell broke loose again. I recall the wide range of developmental levels in my class; there was one student named “James” who was over four years old, still in a diaper and threw frequent tantrums. His tantrums were sporadic and occurred at the most inopportune time; usually during transitions from indoors to outdoors or during structured group learning times. This made it extremely difficult to gather and calmly move children from one space to another in an organized and safe fashion. I would often have to either summon for help with “James” so I could get other children indoors. Transitions are regular parts of any child care program, and with the numerous scheduled transitions planned throughout the day, I lost the bulk of the teaching times during the day managing transitions and trying to keep children together in groups.

In *Preschool Teachers Experiences of Stress*, Allison Kelly and Donna Berthelsen identified time, as one of the major teacher stressor themes. “Teachers were most stressed by the numerous demands on their time and the interruptions to their planned time. The teachers’ sense of control was closely related to time demands. Clearly, time pressures interfere with all facets of teaching and this is a pressure that overlaps into all the identified themes” (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995). I spent most of my time during the day containing the children, and meeting their personal care routines, which included meals, snack time, and supervised

bathroom breaks. Needless to say, these routines were time-wasters to free play and structured classroom time. In order to do this, I often organized whole group activities that some, but not all the children would engage in. However, this led to more problems, because I would spend more time disciplining children who were not interested in the activity, than spending actual time on the activity. TV became my teacher assistant, and I often used the TV to get all of the children's attention and take a mental break for myself. TV times allowed me to take a break and breathe.

As a beginning teacher, there were numerous other factors that took away from free play opportunities such as: high child to teacher ratio, little to no time to meet personal needs, low pay incentives, and no opportunities for professional development. These negative factors contributed to my lack of commitment to grow with a program that espoused these sorts of conditions, and early burnout.

I was in a vicious cycle, I would work for a preschool until things were too stressful, then I would leave; usually not making it to a six month marker before opting to transition to another preschool. Once I realized that I was encountering the same issues everywhere I applied, I began to alter the criterion. Subsequently, starting salary became the driver in the search. Eventually, some excited director would "sell me" on a program. I would be offered a few cents more, and that was enough to entice me to leave the current position. I don't recall orientation to a program or attending any regular professional development opportunities while working for a program until approximately the year 2000. I had very little time to develop a curriculum that allowed me to create an active free play environment.

The curriculum was done for me and I rarely referenced it each week. I was constantly in survival mode and did not feel like a professional competent educator whatsoever. My voice was rarely heard and I conformed to my duties. A professionalism challenge for women is described in, *Disciplining Women and Children: Deconstructing Early Education*: “At the bottom of the professional ladder were females who were subjected to universalized curriculum policies, standardized hiring measures, and newly developed forms of teacher evaluation. Education reforms further devalued teaching as an intellectual activity, replacing moral and intellectual dynamics of pedagogy with a focus on classroom management and simplification of content” (Swadener & Mutua, 2004). My priorities in the classroom were usually based around routines such as meals, nap time, and cleaning. Going from center to center, I made a series of flawed, unsupported, uneducated decisions out of frustration. One of my biggest concerns was the lack of professional development opportunities offered to me. I knew in order to break the cycle of ineffective childcare practices, professional development opportunities would have to be at the top of the list of priorities. Buysse and Hollingsworth give suggestions for professional development:

“Assist learners (both those preparing to enter the early childhood field and those who already serve young children and families) in assessing whether there are provisions in program quality standards related to serving children with disabilities and their families. Give learners opportunities to recommend changes to existing standards that would improve program quality for every child” (Hollingsworth, 2009, p. 189).

This was not what I intended on doing after high school and I knew something needed to change if I was going to fulfill my dream to create a learning environment for children that stimulated quality play experiences. I was not satisfied and I had some idea as to what quality free play and early childhood environments were and this was what motivated me to go back to school and start to find a way out of the failed systems that I was dedicating my time and energy to.

Fig. 3. Innovative Play



David Elkind expresses a similar idea in his book; *The Power of Play*, “Play when divorced from work can be painful. Consider a teacher who has innovative ideas about how to make the subject matter interesting and exciting for his students. If that teacher cannot implement his ideas, thanks to a test-driven curriculum, he will be frustrated and unhappy. Contrariwise, a worker whose ideas are

welcomed and rewarded by her employer is going to feel happy at work” (Elkind, 2007, p. 233).

Following the Leader

After a few years and more jobs as a teacher’s assistant and/or teacher in several child care centers, I applied for a lead teacher position with Peoria Avenue Preschool. The center interested me because there starting pay was \$7.00 an hour which was well above what I was making at the time. The program was privately owned by an older couple who were kind and caring, almost like your own grandparents would be. I particularly found the owner Carolyn to be very joyful yet stern. She had some alternative ways to running the program and implementing the programs curriculum. I wanted to be a part of this program for reasons more than money, I believed in her alternative teaching philosophy and joined the program. This was a turning point for me as a professional in the early childhood field. I started as a teacher in the program’s four-year-old classroom and absolutely enjoyed the experience. Me and the children in my class spent many hours playing with the variety of materials that were ordered for our room. The Owner had high expectations for the program, emphasized cleanliness, organization of materials and she gave me regular feedback about my performance. She also asked me what I wanted to do in the classroom and gave me full liberty to develop the classroom curriculum that I thought would best fit the children in my classroom. She gave me full access to over 20 curriculum books to develop weekly activities. I was not use to having my ideas being heard

and encouraged, but I welcomed the support. In Marriane Bloch's article: *Conceptions of Play in The History of Early Childhood Education*; she puts forth accurately, the condition befalling the modern preschool classroom:

“Theoretical and empirical literature consistently point to the importance of play for young children’s cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical development. Despite evidence to support the importance of play in child care programs, parents and teachers question the importance of play in curriculum, the extent of time allotted to free play, or the absence of more “academically oriented” activities in many preschools and child care programs” (Bloch & Choi, 1990, p. 31).

I began to feel like a competent individual whose ideas were respected and I had the freedom to implement play approaches in the classroom. My theories around play were similar to Carolyn’s theories and this undoubtedly supported the possibility for play activities. A shared belief in teaching approaches has the ability to unite or divide ECE (early childhood education) professionals. “Many teachers (78%) endorsed classroom practices that promoted children’s play and encouraged active exploration and discoveries” (Lee, 2006). In my experience at Peoria Avenue Preschool, the shared beliefs about play united me to commit to the program that at that time meet my needs as a teacher. I recall rearranging the classroom by placing the over 40 two tier cubby units around the circumference of the room. After rearranging the space, I recall Carolyn giving me feedback about the newly arranged wide open space. Carolyn first acknowledged my

intentions but then began to tell me that it was best practice for children to have semi-enclosed areas that border specific play zones. This was a new concept for me at the time; I figured that creating more space for play would be more beneficial. However, intentionally preparing the environment for effective instruction was not a new idea. In *Guiding Children's Verbal Play*, Ok Seung Yang says,

“Since young children’s activities are dominated by the physical environment, the teacher should organize the classroom with some activity areas such as book, block, dramatic play, science and math, manipulatives, art, and music areas” (Yang, 2000).

Carolyn helped me develop these theme based play areas and allowed me to grow even more as a beginning early childhood teacher.

Carolyn encouraged me to return to school and supported this process by adjusting my work schedule in order for me to start attending evening classes at the local community college. Attending community college opened many doors for me; I started to build professional relationships with individuals who were in the same field as myself and make connections to resources. With feelings of my own self-efficacy, I knew internally, new and wonderful discoveries were before me. Two of my current mentors, Beth Blue Swadener, and Mark Nagasawa sum up the location of my journey at this time, in their article: *Impacts of the Arizona System Ready/Child Ready Professional Development Project on Preschool Teachers' Self-Efficacy*: “Albert Bandura (1997) first introduced the concept of self-efficacy, describing it as “beliefs in one’s capacity to organize and

execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p.3).

According to this theory, teachers’ beliefs in their ability to influence students’ motivation and achievement play a meaningful and important role in affecting desired outcomes for students (Ross, 1992). Guskey (1987) argues that teachers’ perceived sense of efficacy in teaching and learning can be thought of as their feeling of personal responsibility for student learning. Given the myriad challenges that nontraditional adult learners can face (Ackerman, 2005; Dukakis et al., 2007), the AzSRCR project developed a theory of change that rested on the concept of teacher self-efficacy” (Ciyer A. , Nagasawa, Swadener, & Patet, p. 132). The whole shift for me to further my education was significant to my growth as a teacher and as a lifelong learner. I quickly began to make the connection to school and developmentally appropriate practices. I was able to reflect upon my own approaches and values and begin to align them with researched theories. This was an exciting time for me and I was embarking on an academic journey that would open my mind and allow me to create play based environments as my main teaching method.

Director Dilemma

In the classroom, I was having fun again; my work did not leave me dazed and confused as much as it did before. The Owner was happy, I was happy, and the families I served were happy. The owner acknowledged my connections with the families I served and after a couple of years as a teacher, my time in the classroom came to an end. I was promoted to assistant director for a few months,

and then I became the Director full-time. As a director, I saw another side of free play. I was no longer a curriculum developer, I was a business manager. One of the main measures I implemented was state licensing regulations. As a director, I also had numerous other, non-classroom responsibilities. I was the “bad guy.” I had to make sure staff hours were low, child enrollment was high, maintain the programs licensing regulations, keep a smile on the parents face, and do weekly billing just to name a few of my responsibilities. Sometimes my responsibilities expanded even further into logistic types of tasks; picking up lunch in between breaks, giving staff breaks, fixing broken water sprinklers, administering first aid, asthma treatments, helping to calm a child displaying disruptive behavior, and checking a child’s diabetes number before meals. After working eight to 12 hours a day, I would muster new energy, fight rush hour to drive to Phoenix College to take my classes at night. I was a full-time student and quickly reaching my breaking point.

Operating on overload, I was overwhelmed and did not know how much longer I could perform at this highly demanding level. One morning, before even going to work I became sick. I could not stay home though, I was solely responsible for opening the center and running the daily program operations; staying home was not an option. After arriving to the center, I became physically sick again, bringing up my breakfast in a back classroom bathroom. A parent saw me and asked if I was okay, I nodded while I mumbled “yes” and quickly went back to my front office post. I was physically sick, light headed and having a full fledged anxiety attack while opening the center. This was a time for me to step

back, reflect and take a much needed break from early childhood altogether. I wanted to do so much for the children, staff and the program Owner, but the levels of stress and responsibility was starting to take a toll on me mentally and physically.

Hiatus to Head Start

After a brief hiatus from the early childhood field, I started to have a renewed desire to go back to teaching. I had obtained my associates degree in child care administration from Phoenix College and I wanted to apply my degree to my place of work. But, I had had enough negative experiences in the field that I thoroughly researched the prospective programs I would potentially join. I was refreshed and was not going to settle into another stress filled cycle of failure and dissatisfaction. I searched and found Head Start at Southwest Human Development. All of my teaching experience prior to Head Start was in center based (for profit) programs primarily in the west valley. Southwest Human Development (SWHD) was a large company and located in Phoenix. This would be a total change for me; I would no longer be working a few miles from my home in the suburbs, but traveling at least 20 miles a day to get to my classroom. I was willing to make the longer commute and transition to Head Start the more I researched the program's local and national approaches and practices. The program's philosophies closely aligned with my own. "Head Start is a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive

development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families.” (Head Start Website)

I knew I had found where I needed to be. Before I was even placed in a classroom at Head Start, I was put through a rigorous and extensive training and orientation. This was totally new for me, and I immediately felt like I was a part of a profession and not just joining another personalized and self-serving work force. This was significant because prior to Head Start, I was never thoroughly introduced to a program’s approaches, practices, values and philosophy before actually working with children except when I was in COOP. I felt as if I was in a safe place where I could grow and create an early childhood environment that supported free play and my same values. To my gratification, that was exactly what I experienced. In my Head Start classroom, I facilitated many rich free play experiences. The majority of the population I served was monolingual (Spanish) but our goals remained the same, we learned through play and I was a part of a program that supported free play. The program had regular ongoing training opportunities that were not optional, regular training professional development days (free from child care responsibilities). There were monthly meetings to discuss any concerns and ongoing professional development activities. The purpose of the quarterly professional development trainings was to help the teachers grow and incorporate innovative or highlight successful approaches already in place. Teacher’s successes were shared and collaborative activities between teachers were encouraged. Head Start also replenished classroom materials and provided additional mental health support for children. In Head

Start, I learned the power of family, and the rich funds of knowledge each child brings to the classroom. I reached a professional milestone as a head Start teacher, because I was exposed to the power of collaboration and the amount of success that can be achieved when resources are made available.

In Head Start, my class schedule was dramatically different from my first teaching experience post High School. I learned to design centers around the children's interest and play took up the majority of our day. Since the classroom was open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., we had ample time to develop activities and participate in play based learning approaches. I would arrive to the site early in the summer months, and set up materials outdoors for children to play with as they arrived. The children had access to an art cart (stocked with markers, paper, glue, stencils, collage pieces, yarn and other art supplies), a tarp with a bean bag and basket of books, a CD player with CDs, musical instruments, big blocks, Legos, a sensory table with water and toys inside as well as gross motor materials such as bikes, balls and tools to use in our sunflower garden. Upon arrival, I greeted the children and the parents, and before I could ask my students how their morning was, they were already using one of the set up materials. In the winter months, when we started the morning inside because it was dark, the children would follow the same procedures.

This part of my professional journey helped revive a part of me; personally, I was renewed and I achieved a sense of accomplishment, because I was able to replicate the fun, memorable play experiences that I once had as a child. I knew at this point that I was in the right place professionally.

Super Support

There were numerous support systems that I was able to connect to while working for Head Start; there were family support specialist, mental health specialist and speech pathologist just to name a few. In addition, there were also resources and support that was made available to me as a Child Development Specialist. I was treated like a professional and the program showed its interest in my professional development by linking up with Arizona State University's Head Start Hispanic Partnership. Lead by Elizabeth B. Swadener, I embarked on another educational journey that would again mold my ideas of play and the higher levels of play that can be achieved with support and guidance. My Mentor, Beth Swadener, demonstrated the utmost respect and matched enthusiasm for each of us adult learners in the cohort. Beth individually valued the funds of knowledge that each of us brought to the classroom. Never letting us steer away from our interest, Beth supported our professional goals and helped sculpt each of member in the cohort achieve their individual dreams. "Characteristics of good mentors are consistent across disciplines; good mentors are encouraging, supportive, committed, sensitive, flexible, respectful, enthusiastic, diplomatic, patient, and willing to share information, credit, and recognition (Love & Rowland, 1999). Mentoring relationships offer advantages for both the mentor and protégé. The protégé gains an advocate who can provide support and guidance" (McCormick & Brennan, 2001). The ASU Head Start Hispanic Partnership was designed to help a diverse cohort of teachers from Head Start

across the valley to participate in a highly supportive, individualized educational path of success. Between the knowledge I received from ASU (Hispanic Partnership), my Mentors Beth Swadener, Mark Nagasawa, Margo Dahlstrom and other Instructors). Without the guidance, and individual support of the cohort, I could possibly be on the same path, moving from center to center, trying to make sense of what I knew was successful free play practices.

Early in the cohort, I recall taking ECD 400, with Instructor Mark Nagasawa. For one of our activities, we were to reflect on our own teaching practices and reflect on our approach. These reflective types of assignments allowed me to examine my teaching approaches and develop paths and develop professional goals for myself [see Appendix D: Eyes Wide Shut assignment]. There were direct connections between the mentor support I received and the personal and professional choices I began to make. The quality and results of my decisions changed from when I first entered into the early childhood teaching field. There was a direct correlation between the instruction I received and activities or narratives of me applying the instruction in my own classroom. There was a theme that echoed throughout my studies at ASU which were: learning through play is appropriate and best practice. This encouraged me to continue applying the free play approaches in my classroom.

Observing Free Play

After preparing four classrooms to transition to kindergarten from Head Start, I decided to join Quality First as an Assessor (a division of First Things

First). In the role of an Assessor, I observe, assess, and document early childhood environments statewide. I chose to step out of the classroom and look at free play (along with other characteristics of quality child care) because I wanted quality child care to be accessible to all.

The First Things First Mission Statement reads:

To increase the quality of, and access to, the early childhood development and health system that ensures a child entering school comes healthy and ready to succeed. OUR VISION: All Arizona children birth through age five are afforded opportunities to achieve their maximum potential to succeed in school and life (First, 2011).

The umbrella of the program represented all of the things I stood for, and more. One of the main components of the tools I used are materials and accessibility. Often, we hear these two elements put together when measuring quality. Some patterns I observed while assessing was the lack of children's accessibility to materials or equipment during play or a minimal amount of time to the play materials and/or equipment depending on the programs situation. I observed children frequently being limited to specific, teacher selected materials in a restricted area for free play, which prohibited a true free play experience. In such restrictive settings, the children would often compete over materials or engage in inappropriate behaviors (throwing toys or damaging toys). This is contrary to the learned developmentally appropriate practices I had learned to embrace over my academic and career path. This was a disturbing trend I was

observing. I also observed that the biggest obstacle between free play was the daily schedule that the teacher was adhering to; I could not help but see myself as the teachers I was observing, going through the same situations I went through as a beginning teacher. Similar to my experience, the teachers often tried to keep children focused on teacher directed group activities and offered very few opportunities for free play.

All of these factors limited free play and did not allow young children to learn through active exploration. I believe that these trends are significant, because it shows what the current state of free play is in a state that is already “falling behind” nationally. If teachers are pushing schedules that have embedded time emphasis, and the majority of the day is tied to routines, the most effective and foundational method of learning is not occurring as regularly as it should be to promote effective I believe that children are regularly not participating in valuable play experiences. If we are to accept that children learn through play then we must make play a priority for children. However, the process at which the outcomes are being achieved is not through free play which is highly more appropriate and effective.

CONCLUSION

Free Play Implications

The importance of free play goes beyond the classroom, and into the very topic of educational reforms. Free play is the staple that connects early childhood theories and is the primary way younger children experience and learn about the world around them. My own personal interest in learning through play stems back to my childhood experiences. As a child, the rich play experiences my parents allowed me, helped me value play as a teacher. I personally have been able to identify my learning style based on my past. I have been able to correlate many aspects of my own learning development, to a childhood of free play. Various researches have tied cognitive development in young children to free play activities. It is similar to our findings about teaching children how to read. We discovered that a systematic and direct phonics approach yielded a greater outcome on reading development in young children; opposed to teaching children rote memorization, dolch words, and Dick and Jane. With phonics installations, children are now reading earlier, decoding new words for themselves, and now have a tool for continuous reading development as they grow older. The discovery of phonics when teaching reading revolutionized the area of reading education. If we conclude, that young children develop cognitively primarily through free play, then it is the task of educators to modify structured curriculum maps to facilitate this initiative.

Free Play Implications for Research and Educators

If an individual accepts and pursues the role of an educator, then they must take on the personal responsibility, to continue learning effective teaching approaches and incorporating foundational methods such as free play. Professional development opportunities for teachers and other early childhood practitioners should include reflective activities that allow them to “soul search” and examine why they teach and what their goals are for teaching. Support is needed to help early childhood professionals to not forget why they do what they do and how ineffective approaches hinder the growth of not only themselves, but the child and ultimately the community they serve. If research will commit itself to delve more poignantly at this theory surrounding freeplay, the academic community will substantiate my findings. If the possibilities implied by many other researchers are more conclusively established, then we will have to make amending allowances in the way we train teachers for early education. The training for early educators has come a very long way, as we have evolved in our understanding of the “child.” If free play motifs are incorporated, we will have to further train early educators. The overall under appreciation of teachers has always prohibited and/or limited the on-going training of said group. However, I am confident of the academic community to regulate itself and find a way to incorporate this knowledge into its’ professional development mainstream. Early childhood development is quickly becoming recognized as the true helm of all education. We are together realizing that if the foundation of the house is laid correctly, there will be no building deficits in the house itself. Correspondingly,

as educators, we are learning that the early childhood arena is truly “first things first.” We have determined that the failures our children are experiencing in middle and high school and even in elementary school, are strongly linked to the sort of early childhood development tracks that they have been exposed to. If their beginning experiences have not been successful, everything that follows is also handicapped, or disabled. In all of our scaffolding attempts to strengthen the academic success of American children, there are none more impactful than those done in early childhood. If what I think is true of free play, that it is in a sense an “operating disc or system” that can format the potential of a child’s learning abilities in their future, both researchers and teachers have a great responsibility to conclude and incorporate this wisdom.

Free Play Implications in the Early Childhood Classroom

As early childhood professionals, the foundational theories around free play cannot be lost in dysfunctional early childhood schedules or business priorities. As we began to understand the capacity of children to grasp more earlier in life, we as educators went from zero to 60 in ten seconds sort of speak, with incorporating content into the early classroom curriculums. We vilified free play in the classroom, in an attempt to feed the data driven vehicle, which said the young child brain had the capacity to do more, earlier. We abandoned grandparents as caregivers, in exchanged for preschool environments, that we had hoped would academically cultivate our very young. Yes, early childhood programs have the opportunity to emphasis their own philosophies and

approaches; but should not fail to acknowledge the need to provide children with sound, researched based, effective practices which include such opportunities as free play. I have observed lesson plans that seek to include the knowledge about “movement and brain function” to learning, by teaching a Language Arts objective with a cut and glue the word activity. Yes, the children are not just re-writing the word on another line, they are manipulating the materials, and this supposedly increasing retention of the information by the brain. In the same way, we will have to look for researched based ideas on incorporating free play to meet curriculum standards. In centers, like a kitchen play center, children free play cooking a meal. With the teacher as a low key “math curriculum agent” he or she can play along and direct the play to simulate a math condition. She can ask the student, who is she cooking the meal for, and if the child says his family, the agent can ask: how many people are you talking about? The child may say, “my mom, my dad and me.” The agent would respond: how many people is that? If the child says three, part of the learning experience is complete. The agent might then suggest, how many plates will you need? How many potatoes will you need? And so on. While helping the child to set the table, the agent can engage the child in mathematical thinking, and simultaneously evaluate the child’s feedback. This approach closely aligns with the Montessori Method, but it also personifies one way free play can be engaged to meet curriculum standards. Also, during the scenario, the conversation could be used to solicit and elevate the child’s choice of words, use of words and vocabulary. On a social level, the child can be evaluated on how he or she interacts with other children during the kitchen

play. If the child is open to cooperation with other children, or the agent; if the child solicits participation from others, or discourages the participation of others can all be evaluation opportunities for social development in the child. As you can see from this example, a little work is required to embed free play in the classroom, and meet curriculum standards at the same time. Nonetheless, it is my bottom line belief, that this transition is forthcoming. It will take some work, and it will take some time, and it will take some training to develop best practices, but I know the classroom can be reformed to embrace free play; and that the benefits yielded will be worth it all.

Free play installation will send all sorts of ripples through the classroom attenuations on how we assess students, evaluate them, and consequently how we allow them to learn. We have already learned how not teaching past the child's interest time period is counterproductive, and we have applied this learning to the classroom. In the same way, free play motifs will also redefine how we evaluate what children are learning. While I feel the importance of adding content to the early childhood environment is relevant, I am equally emphatic about the importance of incorporating free play into that curriculum mainstream. We cannot turn our backs on the ramifications presented by the potential benefits of free play, we can only move forward with the transition, in lieu of the long range potential profits.

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APPENDIX A

**A PICTORIAL JOURNEY
FROM CHILDHOOD TO CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL**

Just the Three of Us...

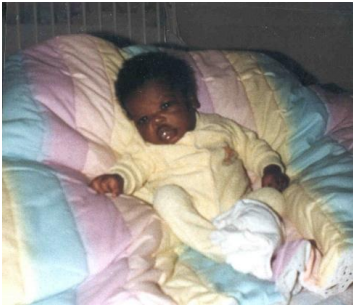
The following series of pictures outline the journey depicted in this narrative. In the beginning, we were a family of four, my mom and dad, and me and my partner in crime, my sister Myte. After my parents separated, it was just my mom, my sister and I.



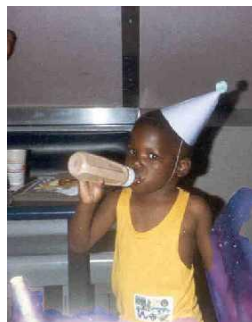
Bottom-Center: My mom in her youth, she was beautiful in my eyes, smart, and poised; and I wanted to be just like her. She was in college when I was a girl, I watched her study, I even read the books she did, and her major was early childhood development.

Then there was Three More...

Seven years after my parents split up, my mother re-married, and eventually three more children were born into our family. First came the boys; Enoch the oldest, and Elijah was second. I immediately fell in love with the new arrivals, and I was obsessed with caring for them. My mother use to call me her “right hand” child.



My baby brothers (in the center), Enoch the oldest on the left, and the hardest to negotiate with as a child; Eli on the far right/top with the bottle in his mouth, who was always sweet and compliant.
At the bottom/left, Enoch with the bottle, and Eli, then Enoch on the bottom right.



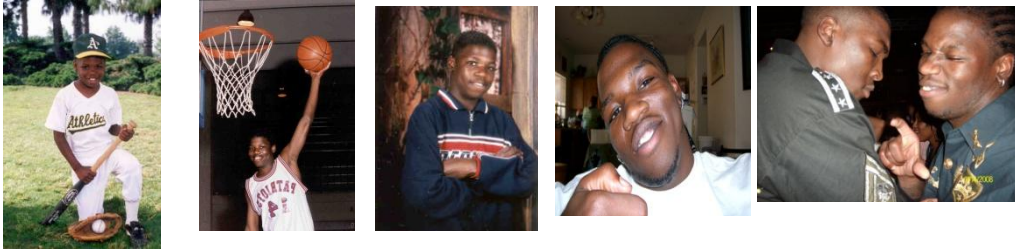
Helping to Take Care of Boys...

The boys were tricky, playful, rough, easy to spoil, but difficult to discipline. Free play for them came naturally, they were instinctively creative, and were able to find amusement in any environment. As a matter of fact, they searched out adventure, took unsafe risk, and were walking hazards. The boys were boys, active and best friends, even partners in crime as I was with my sister Myte. Caring for them was easy; disciplining them was a whole other book. They grew up and yielded daughters with comparable personalities; sweet (Eli) and sour (Enoch) – their daughters respectively: Lexi and NuNu. Below, (left) Enoch watching my mom prepare to leave Elijah at a home-style day care, on the (right) Enoch at a college facility child care having lunch, he was the star on the campus. Everyone knew he was my mom's son, she was popular. Center/bottom, Enoch in yellow, Elijah crawling on the floor of his college campus preschool. On that day when my mom brought Elijah in, the staff were all surprised, they told my mom that they thought Enoch was an only child based on his behavior. My mom told them, at the time, she had four children, and that she specialized in making each child feel like he was an only child.

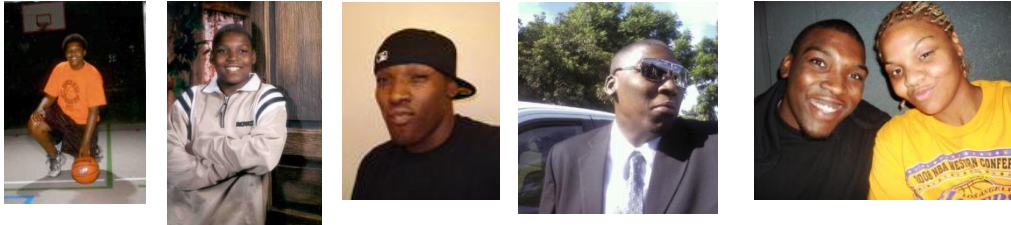


The Boys Grew Up...

The boys grew up fine, they are currently ages 26 and 24. Enoch, the oldest, has a daughter named Arianna, we call her Nu Nu. Her personality is similar to his when he was a child. He flounders in his personal relationship with his child's mother, and he is just settling down in college, however, he stayed clear of drug addiction, and is overall a pretty good adult.



Elijah on the other hand, has a daughter named Lexi and she mirrors his sweet personality as a child. He is currently in college, has a job, and lives with his baby's mother.

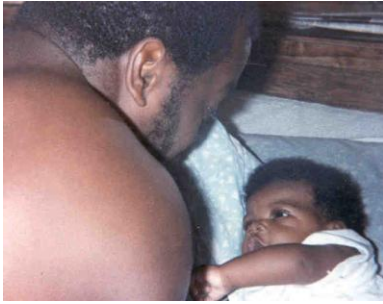


Below, their daughters, my test subjects:
Elijah's daughter Lexi on the Left, and Enoch's Daughter NuNu on the right.

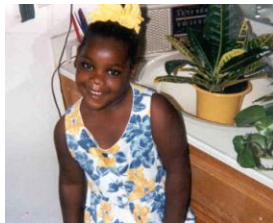


Finally there was Aericka, the Youngest...

Aericka was the youngest, she is the baby my mother recalls me asking her to have for me. As a child, I loved the babies, I wanted my mother to keep them coming, lol. Aericka was special to me, I knew she would be the last, I doted over her, caring for a girl was difficult, she was a girl, but disciplining her was easy, she looked up to me.



Aericka is now 21, she found it difficult to find a fit within the sibling matrix; the boys had each other, and me and Myte were a pair. Even though she was the idol of my eye and apple in the eye of my sister, she felt isolation. She graduated from the Coop program where I taught while still a student in high school. Today she is in college, but battles with her weight. She recently turned 21.



My Partner in Crime, and motivation...

My sister in crime however, Myte, was there with me from the beginning. She was not the caregiver type, but she supported me in all of my imaginative free play when we were growing up.



My brothers children, who arrived after my education, have benefitted the most from my journey.

Then as we rallied around my mom as she went through breast cancer, I grew stronger, and I came full circle.



Routines...

Teja during the early years “Routines” at Children’s World 2000 working in the preschool environment. I moved a traditional reading session into the play yard to stimulate more interest, and pre-stage for free play.



My parents initiated the journey, and supported me along the way, as I approached my landmarks...



Free Play in the Sandbox...

Here I indulge the children of the Machan School in free play in the sandbox (2005).



Machan School: Free Play in the sandbox (2005).



Machan School: Free Play in the sandbox (2005), 2.

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF APPRECIATION FROM MY MOM

January 1, 2011

Dear Daughter Teja,

Our lives together as mother and daughter, has been quite a journey. I am not only proud of you and your academic achievements, but I am inspired by you as I watch you grow and develop as an educator.

There are so many contributions you have made to this family from childhood, no words I can say will express the breath of my appreciation. I was a single parent, with five children and no significant other supports in place. Unwittingly I turned to myself and the children I possessed to meet our needs. Quickly, you rose to the occasion, perhaps like millions of other children in our situation, but if there was an award for children who helped significantly to raise their own siblings, you would be at the top of that list.

I quickly saw your potential, and made you Chief Executive Officer of our family. When you picked up my textbook on child development at age nine and diagnosed your brother with the Babinski Test, I was floored. In retrospect, I realize how our poor family circumstances and challenges, coupled with some of the responsibilities I placed on you, may have had negative effects on you later. I wish there was a "do over" clause in life. I wish I could change the past, but it is not possible, so I say to you with all sincerity, I am sorry that our lives were not perfect. I am sorry your role as a child, had to include that of an adult. However, simultaneously you also gained many attributes and abilities, which I feel define your present state of success; both academically and professionally. I think God has a way of turning tragedies into opportunities.

So often, I struggle with our past struggles, and how hard it was on all of us. I often remember you and your contributions as a willing, mature and extremely helpful child during that time, and I simply have to state for the record, how much I appreciated you then, and now. I love you Teja, I appreciate you, and I am very, very proud of your achievements. Congratulations!

Sincerely,

Teresa

Teresa Christian,
Your Mother



APPENDIX C
COOP FEEDBACK DOCUMENT

COOP FEEDBACK DOCUMENT - pg.1

COOP Lesson Plans

Name Teja Date ~~12th~~ 12th
Lab 8 Subject art

Objective- directions creativity
Activity- making fake sandwiches
Review- ask how creative they were with their sandwiches
Materials Needed- sand which cut-outs, mustard, ketchup

Grade 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Comments _____

____ Introduction ____ Appropriately dressed ____ Appropriate clean up
____ Review ____ Adequate use of time ____ Appropriate discipline

This is a cover sheet to an evaluation process we used in the COOP childcare class. The three evaluation forms to follow are attached to this form, and each offers valuable feedback from the real teachers to the student teacher, me.

COOP FEEDBACK DOCUMENT - pg.2

99%

MAY 12TH
Monday

Individual Lab

25 1. Content- age appropriate, teaches to the theme, covers subject matter appropriately.

GREAT LESSON - I LIKE HOW YOU HAD THE KIDS TELL YOU WHAT ALL OF THE INGREDIENTS WERE. THE PIECES WERE ALL A GOOD SIZE & EVERYONE WAS ABLE TO UNDERSTAND EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE TO DO. SOME OF THEM REALLY LIKED THAT CATSUP!!!

24 2. Discipline- children handled appropriately. If time out is used- child is not left too long.

YOU DID A GOOD JOB OF WATCHING EVERYONE AND CALLING OUT THE NAMES OF THE CHILDREN THAT WERE HAVING PROBLEMS. THE LIGHT OUT WAS A GOOD IDEA WHEN SOME ASKED "WHERE DO I PUT THE CATSUP!" (I WANT A DRINK) (WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY CUP)

25 3. Objective- clearly defined, taught to the objective, valuable knowledge gained by children.

HOW FUN! THIS WAS A WONDERFUL WAY OF LEARNING HOW TO MAKE SANDWICHES - THEY ALL FOLLOWED WHAT YOU TOLD THEM & DID A GOOD JOB. WHEN THEY WERE ALL DOING THE SAME THING AT THE SAME TIME - IT MADE IT EASY TO KEEP CONTROL.

25 4. Time management- good use of full class time, valuable experiences for children, smooth flowing class.

WELL ORGANIZED - YOU WERE ABLE TO USE THE WHOLE CLASS TIME TO MAKE YOUR SANDWICHES - FUN HU-----

5. Helpful hints, suggestions, comments.

YOU HAD VERY GOOD CONTROL WHEN YOU STARTED YOUR FINAL. THE KIDS NEEDED TO KNOW THAT THEY WERE NOT TO BE QUIET. YOU NEEDED A LITTLE MORE PAPER ON THE TABLES - MAKE SURE THE WHOLE TABLE IS COVERED SO THAT THE KIDS WILL HAVE PLENTY OF ROOM TO WORK. CUTE IDEA TO SING THE THANK YOU SONG!!!

I HAVE REALLY ENJOYED HAVING YOU IN 8TH HOUR THIS YEAR. AND ALSO HAVING YOU AS AN AID AFTER SCHOOL - YOU ARE AN EXCELLENT TEACHER - I LOVE TO WATCH YOU WITH THE KIDS - KEEP IT UP ---



Individual Lab

Teja (man)

1. Content- age appropriate, teaches to the theme, covers subject matter appropriately.
great lesson, your so
Creative!

2. Discipline- children handled appropriately. If time out is used- child is not left too long. Good discipline! Kids always seem to listen to you! I can't believe that Michael sat in time out without moving.

3. Objective- clearly defined, taught to the objective, valuable knowledge gained by children. Was clearly defined and taught. I liked how you had them say what they were putting on their sandwiches.

4. Time management- good use of full class time, valuable experiences for children. smooth flowing class. good use of time.

5. Helpful hints, suggestions, comments. you always put mayonaise on a sandwich!
to much ~~of~~ ketchup.

COOP FEEDBACK DOCUMENT - pg.4

Seja Alllyn
Jual
5/12/97

Individual Lab

1. Content- age appropriate, teaches to the theme, covers subject matter appropriately.

good lesson - very creative and
good ideas. cute idea to sing

"Thank You Song!"

2. Discipline- children handled appropriately. If time out is used- child is not left too long. I like how you gave children

their smocks so they didn't run around crazily. The children really listened and followed direction

in not too sure mikey should've been in time out

3. Objective- clearly defined, taught to the objective, valuable knowledge gained by children. Very clear directions - easy for children to understand and follow

4. Time management- good use of full class time, valuable experiences for children.

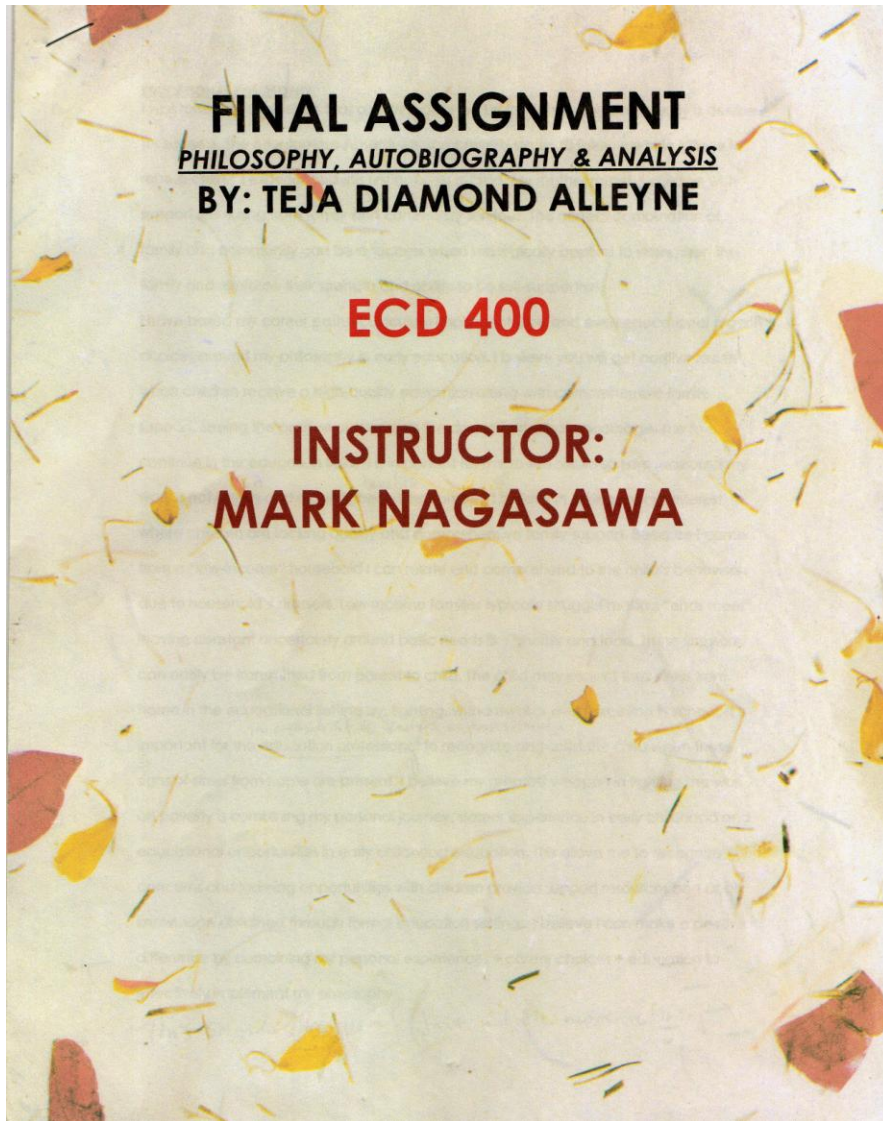
smooth flowing class. Very smooth class. Set would've been easier to have baggies made individually with ingredients and names written on them.

5. Helpful hints, suggestions, comments. The children really have good respect and listening skills around you. Very impressive

Try to encourage Dalton a little more. He needs it

APPENDIX D

Final Assignment: Philosophy, Autobiography & Analysis



EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

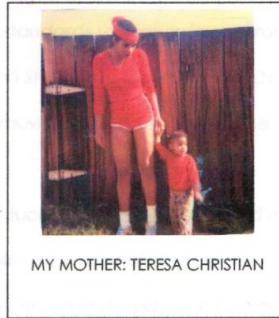
I was raised on the beliefs that a child supported by the family and community is destined for success. The now famous Ashanti-African proverb states "It takes a whole village to raise a child." I experienced this first hand as a child. My mother raised 5 children with support stemming from family and community services. The correct combination of family and community can be a success when strategically applied to strengthen the family and reinforce their strength and ability to be self-supportive. I have based my career paths, curriculum implementation and even educational growth choices around my philosophy in early education. I believe you will get positive results when children receive a high-quality education along with comprehensive family support. Seeing the positive outcomes is the driving force that encourages me to continue in the education field, it is important for me to see results so I am reassured my work is not in vain and actually benefits families. I believe in taking special interest where children are lacking quality and comprehensive family support. Because I came from a "low-income" household I can relate and comprehend to the child's behaviors due to household's stressors. Low-income families typically struggle making "ends meet", leaving constant uncertainty around basic needs like, shelter and food. These stressors can easily be transmitted from parent to child. The child may project their stress from home in the educational setting by, fighting, withdrawal or even excelling in school. It is important for the education professional to recognize and assist the child when these signs of stress from home are present. I believe my greatest weapon in fighting the war on poverty is combining my personal journey, career experience in early childhood and educational opportunities in early childhood education. This allows me to recognize concerns and learning opportunities with children provide support resources and apply knowledge obtained through formal education settings. I believe I can make a positive difference by combining my personal experiences + career choices + education to effectively implement my philosophy.

This sounds like you! (Just a little more refining.)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was raised with 3 sisters and 3 brothers. Being the second oldest I quickly became the "Mother" when my mom was not present. My mother gave me lots of responsibilities at an early age. Occasional my family was without basic needs like food and diapers. This is where I learned to be creative, making diapers out of towels and using coffee creamer packets to make baby formula substitutes until my mother returned. I believe my experiences as a child made me into the resourceful, appreciative woman I am today. My mother worked very hard to expose my siblings and me to healthy educational experiences. My Mom often took us to free trips to canyons, live Theater, museums and libraries. My mom was resourceful and creative and I inherited those qualities from her. Although it sounds like a "tough" child-hood, I didn't recognize the pitfalls as defeat because my family always found away to be resilient and we where together. I instill all these qualities in whatever I apply myself to today. The dedication my mother showed me has been instilled in me; I am a determined soul who strives at completion and success in everything I do.

The only suggestion is to, perhaps, more clearly tie this to your teaching (which you do in your philosophy statement) - how this influenced your choice to become a teacher, ~~it was~~ On the other hand maybe you wouldn't want to change anything because you say a great deal about who you are ~~then~~ with very few words (a big accomplishment).



Analysis

When researching the history of early education or early care, it is surprising to see what has changed and what has stayed the same. It is also disappointing to see what concerns still exist that were recognized years ago. In Emily D. Cahan's "Past Caring", Cahan documents facts and progress of the United States role in early education and education for the poor. One of the most staggering points Cahan brought up was that "there has always been a two-tiered early childhood system... we have had day nurseries for the poor and early childhood education for the affluent". Cahan goes on to describe that nurseries "were crowded, marginally staffed by untrained personnel, and barely able to meet minimal standards of sanitation." I found this as being one of our greatest concerns currently in day cares. It is amazing and unfortunate that this is still a major issue. There are upcoming standards that sound very promising as described by Jennifer Johnson, Head Start-State Collaboration Director. The future looks brighter but as we all know "the process can be the biggest struggle."

Viewing the examples of early education worldwide allowed me to open my eyes to new approaches unlike my own. At first it was very uncomfortable to watch the day care centers in Asia without passing immediate judgment because some of the practices went against what I practice. The little boy harassing the other boy repeatedly disturbed me. It was even more disturbing for me to see how non-responsive the Teacher