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Low-Income African American Parents' Views About the Value of Play for Their Preschool Age Children in Head Start

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES

LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS' VIEWS ABOUT THE VALUE OF
PLAY FOR THEIR PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN IN HEAD START

By

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In The Name Of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful All Praise Belongs to Allah. I dedicate this accomplishment to my grandparents, William and Sadie Murphy, the foundation of my family's faith, wisdom and courage. To my mother, Naomi Williams I miss you very much. To my aunts and uncles, who continued building the foundation with their strong values, encouragement, and support. To Barb, Pat, and Beverly, my big sisters, your combined ninety plus years as educators inspired me to keep going. Jamila and Malcolm, thank you for the gift of grandchildren during this journey. This is my legacy to them. Cheryl, I thank you for being an incredible friend and supporter in this long process. To my husband Stann, thank you so much for helping me through those challenging times and to persevere. I love you all very much!

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted to acquire a description of low income African American mother's beliefs about play's relationship with cognitive development. African American mothers of preschool children attending a Head Start program in the central region of Florida were recruited. Parental beliefs were explored through a semi-structured interview to gain insight regarding play's impact on language development, critical thinking, and social competency. Head Start was selected based on being an established national federally funded program for low income families. Overall, the sample of low-income mothers held very positive views on the value of play for cognitive development. They believed that play may be essential for young children's development in social interactions, creativity, problem solving, and other areas that contribute to kindergarten readiness.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The role of play has been studied in one form or another over the past decades, giving rise to a variety of suggested functions. Some researchers have focused on play as providing the release of energy, recreation, recapitulation, and practice (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Play has been viewed as a supportive activity that provides the opportunity to practice actions that are useful in adult life. Freud (1961) supported the idea of play having an important role in the emotional development of children in terms of constraints of reality. Erikson (1963) conceived play as a way that children can work through tensions. Singer and Singer (1990) suggested that play was a way for children to be creative and venturesome, which may contribute to development in other domains such as cognitive development. Cognitive development is a key area that can be enhanced by play. Decades ago Froebel (1887) noted that play is related to cognitive advancement and would give a child the opportunity to learn certain skills in a non-stressful environment.

Play may reflect a child's development by revealing the child's current cognitive abilities. Play encourages acquiring information, creativity, and consolidating information. Children gain skills in metacognition, operational thinking, divergent thinking, and problem solving (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). Therefore, it is important for parents and teachers to reinforce important developmental phases of growth, expressed through behavioral skills or conceptual abilities in play (Johnson et al., 1999).

In early childhood, play has a strong positive relationship with language ability, thus having an instrumental role in the development of cognitive growth, communication and emergent literacy (Johnson et al.). Many types of play, such as peer play, require the child to have certain language skills. Moreover, Howes (1987) indicated communication skills are crucial for peer interactions; children with delayed language abilities have fewer complex interactions with their peers. There is some evidence that the parents' speech is correlated to the child's cognitive organization and frequency of receptive language (Watson, 1996).

Subsequently, play can enhance a child's readiness for school by facilitating cognitive and other areas of development. School readiness is the primary goal of many

early intervention programs such as Head Start, which are primarily designed to serve children from low-income families. Coolahan, Mendez, Frantuzzo, and McDermott (2000) concluded that there are strong associations among learning skills, classroom behaviors, and play. Children who demonstrated high levels of motivation, attention and classroom tasks, and positive attitudes about learning also displayed positive interactive play behaviors. Unfortunately, children who displayed disruptive behavior while engaging in play activities had high levels of conduct problems and hyperactivity across classroom activities. Perhaps the improvement of play interactions among preschool children might actually enhance their school readiness (Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999).

Curry and Arnaud (1984) argued that the foundation of play begins in the earliest relationships with parents or caregivers initiating play ideas, pointing out play possibilities, and responding to play efforts of their children. Creasey (1998) found a relationship between play quality and parental support of play behaviors; consequently, children's play may actually be a reflection of an effective caregiving environment.

Parental beliefs have been instrumental as a source of influence on the developing child and the parent-child relationship (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1995). The study of parental beliefs and attitudes emerged from the recognition that parents, as thinking beings, have interpretations regarding events; therefore, these interpretations probably influence many of their actions as well as feelings (Goodnow, 1988). McGillicuddy-De-Lisi and Sigel stated that "beliefs organize the world for individuals, enabling them to cope with everyday life without being overwhelmed by information and decision making demands" (p.333) Beliefs thus serve as a source of parental management of behaviors that influence children's intellectual and play development (Holden, 1997).

Parenting beliefs about the value of play for childhood development and early childhood education seem to fall along a continuum. Some parents embrace play as essential although others are less impressed by the fact that play could be a contributing factor in childhood development (Roopnarine, Shin, Jung, & Hossain, 2003). Professional groups in the early childhood arena such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and play researchers (Johnson, 1986; Johnson et al., 1999; Roskos & Christie, 2000) have consistently pointed out the value of play in the acquisition

of cognitive skills. In fact, a number of these researchers maintain that play, rather than more direct instruction, should be at the heart of the early childhood curriculum.

Certainly, the relevance of parental beliefs about play also may have an impact on shaping cognitive goals and expectations for children. These beliefs play out in the decision-making process regarding whether early education programs selected emphasize play and academic activities (Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992). In comparison to the vast literature on the importance of play for social development, there is correspondingly less information on parental beliefs about the value of play in young children's lives and cognitive development (Roopnarine, 2000).

Parental beliefs can be influenced by certain situational and personal factors such as their social economic status (Goodnow, 1988). There is some evidence that low-income families may provide less cognitive stimulation in the home environment negatively affecting the child's school readiness capabilities (Bradley, 1999). For example, Wallace, Roberts, and Lodder (1998) investigated the relationship between maternal interactions and cognitive development of children at one year of age in 92 African American dyads, utilizing the HOME inventory for infants. Children, whose mothers were more stimulating, responsive, and expansive during the communicative attempts, were more developmentally advanced compared to other children in the study. Maternal stimulation and expansiveness was significantly important in relation to developmental status after controlling for mother's education level and play materials provided in the home. Parental beliefs about play, cognitive development, education, and achievement of young children are based on parents prioritizing the educational and social goals of their children.

Children in the United States who are most at-risk for failure in school are from low-income families (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). According to the Children's Defense Fund (2007) one in four preschool children lives in poverty in the United States. Poverty for children has increased by 50% over the past 30 years, and African American children are three times more likely to be poor than Caucasian and Hispanic children. African American children are twice as likely to read below grade level. Head Start, a federally funded program has provided an array of services for parents living in poverty to support

preschool children's cognitive development and school readiness, but little is known about parents' beliefs about play's value and its connection to cognitive development.

Further investigation seems to be warranted regarding parental beliefs about play and play's relationship to cognitive development and school readiness among African American families of low SES. The findings from this study will add to the knowledge base currently addressing parental beliefs about the value of play among poverty level African American families with preschool aged children.

Statement of the Problem Area

An important overall question is whether play is a valuable activity in the promotion of cognitive skills and school readiness. Research suggests that parental beliefs regarding play and its importance to cognitive development might be related to socio-economic level.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore beliefs of low-income African American mothers about the value of play and the play experiences that are perceived as having a significant impact on language development, critical thinking, and social competencies necessary for success in the early learning environment, particularly among low-income African Americans.

Research Questions

1. What are low-income African American mothers beliefs about the value of play and its influence on language development, critical thinking, and social competency?
2. What play experiences do low-income African American mothers perceive as being significant for language development, critical thinking, social competency, and school readiness?

Theoretical Frameworks

There are a variety of theories useful in explaining and understanding the dynamics of play and play behaviors. For the purpose of this study, several theoretical frameworks of cognition will be explored with a focus on an ecological approach in terms of family influence on the child.

Cognitive Theory

Cognitive development and play have been explored for decades. Two of the most noted theorists in this area of research are Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, both contributing knowledge about the relationship between play and cognitive development. Piaget (1962) was the first major theorist to focus on the cognitive aspects of play, suggesting children construct knowledge through interactions with their environment. Jean Piaget's work has made the greatest impact on the study of cognitive development, suggesting children go through a series of cognitive stages in which their thought processes become similar to those of adults; however, children engage in play that matches their cognitive level. According to Piaget, children acquire knowledge through assimilation and accommodation, gain information from their experiences, then compare the new information with what they already know. Therefore, they construct knowledge through interaction with their environment.

Piaget's (1962) theory incorporates three stages of play through which children progress in a conforming sequence, which includes practice play, symbolic play, and games and rules. The first stage, practice play, involves actions that concentrate on physical activities that repeat similar play actions on toys to master their use. Second, symbolic or make-believe play emerges as children think symbolically and use language to make sense of experiences. The last stage is associated with social protocol and interaction, evolving in the concrete operational stage which children use manipulatives and work in groups.

Piaget (1962) believed children are born with innate cognitive structures that they use to organize knowledge and schemes through experiences encountered within their environments. Piaget conceived cognitive development as a progressive sequence of stages, therefore at the end of the sensory-motor period children have the capacity to form symbols and mental images. During interactions with adults, children exact meaning, assign interpretations, and expand prior knowledge. Subsequently these interactions are the basis for communication and cognitive development. Piaget, however, has been criticized for underestimating the cognitive abilities of young children (Lourenco & Machado, 1996).

Vygotsky (1978), building on Piaget's theory, believed play has a more direct role in cognitive development by promoting abstract thought in which children separate meaning from objects and actions. Children function within what Vygotsky terms a "zone of proximal development." With assistance from adults or more capable peers, children are able to problem-solve and complete tasks beyond their current ability. Vygotsky theorized children function on two developmental levels, the actual and the potential level. The actual level is what children have already mastered and can accomplish on their own, and the potential level is what they can accomplish with the assistance of a more experienced partner. Therefore through scaffolding children are able to reach their potential level.

Through dramatic play, a child uses abstract thinking, which prepares the child for academic activities such as transforming a concrete object into an abstract representation, for example, a child might use a block as an airplane or car. Children constantly interact with their environment through play, which contributes to their acquisition and use of language, memory, cooperation and self-regulating behaviors. Cognitive development is a key area that can be enhanced by play, in which research shows a strong positive relationship with play, communication skills and emergent literacy (Johnson et al.).

Ecological Theory

Children and their parents are influenced by a number of environmental factors that may directly affect the play activities, types of play materials available, lack of play materials, or ecological factors such as the adequacy of play venues. It is not a novel idea that environmental factors can influence behaviors. The ecological model takes into consideration the connection between people and their environment; therefore, behavior is viewed as affecting and being affected at multiple levels.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979) provides a framework for viewing the child in context. He describes the individual's environment as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next like Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, p.3). He portrays these nested structures as beginning with the microsystem or proximal influences, (such as family and school), and culminating with the macrosystem or distal influences such as culture and ethnicity. Distal influences have very powerful effects on the family, environment,

parenting, and the child's behavior. For example, parenting beliefs and attitudes can be linked to economic constraints (Garcia, 1996). Some experts suggest that encouraging parents and children to play might counteract some of these economic obstacles in the family system (Jernberg & Booth, 1999).

The microsystem is the closest to the child and contains immediate structures containing face to face influences. This system is composed of the relationships and interactions children have within their immediate family, school, neighborhood, and childcare surroundings. This system has bi-directional influences away from the child and toward the child. For example, the child's parents affect the child's beliefs and behavior as well as the child affects the behavior and beliefs of the parent. At this level, bi-directional influences are the strongest and have the greatest impact on the child; however, interactions at the outer levels can affect the inner structures (Berk, 2000).

The next level, mesosystem relates to the connection between the influences from the microsystem, such as the child's parents and teacher or place of worship and neighborhood. This level includes the interrelations among major settings found in the developing child at a particular point of his or her life.

The exosystem is comprised of a larger social system, in which the child does not function directly, but still feels the positive or negative effects of this system. For example, the parent's workplace schedule or community-based family resources impinge upon the child indirectly. The macrosystem is the outermost system in the child's environment and consists of cultural values, customs, beliefs, and laws (Berk, 2000). Distal influences can have powerful effects on family environment, children's behavior and parenting practices. Ogbu (1981) considered cultural experience to be of major importance in determining child rearing behaviors, values, and goals. For example, he noted that minority parents living in poor urban environments must socialize their children to be successful under very different circumstances than those experienced by Caucasian parents and children from a middle class socioeconomic environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) pointed to parental beliefs as a crucial element in examining parenting practices. Bronfenbrenner concluded that the family seems to be the most effective and efficient system for fostering and sustaining the child's cognitive development. Children's experiences at home profoundly influence their chance for

success at school (Epstein, 1996). Head Start program co-founder Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) focused on the various layers that influence the child's environment through an ecological systems perspective. Broadly, human development is best understood within its social/cultural contexts such as family, school, community, values and belief systems.

An integrated theoretical framework based on cognitive development theory and an ecological viewpoint is proposed to understand the factors that influence the preschool child's cognitive development and its relationship with play. In this model, parental beliefs about play are viewed as being a function of the multiple levels within the culture. This framework calls attention to the interaction and integration of play and play experiences within the family system.

Definitions

The following definitions are used solely to clarify terminology used in this study.

1. Play- for the purpose of this study, play is an activity that may assist learning and self development in young children through spontaneous or planned play activities.
2. Cognitive Development- how a person perceives, thinks, and gains an understanding of his or her world through the interaction and influence of genetic and learned factors (Plotnik, 1999).
3. Head Start Program- a federally funded program that provides free comprehensive services to low-income preschool children and their families.
4. Beliefs- knowledge or ideas that are accepted as true by an individual or group (Siegel, 1985).
5. Socio-Economic Status- the combined total measure of a family's economic and social position based on income, education and occupation.

Abbreviations

1. HSP- Head Start Program
2. SES- Socio-Economic Status

Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, the following is assumed:

1. Participants will comprehend all questions adequately during the interview.

2. Participants will answer the interview questions honestly and completely.

Delimitations

1. The sample population is limited to low-income African American mothers.
2. The sample population only includes low SES mothers with children in Head Start.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review literature related to the study of play, parent beliefs about play, development and play experiences, and play in relation to low-income African American families.

Play

The value of play has been emphasized as far back as the nineteenth century. Froebel (1894) perceived play as an experience that creates the foundation of intellectual development. Play is the way in which children gain insight into their world and provides a means for creative self expression. When children play, they are able to practice cognitive and social skills and extend them in areas such as sharing, emotion regulation, creative thinking and cooperation (Creasey, Jarvis & Berk, 1998).

Children's play has been viewed as the catalyst for social, emotional and cognitive development. During play activities, children extend themselves and appear to be ahead developmentally. Through play, a scaffolding situation presents an opportunity for children to stretch themselves in cognitive areas of language, memory and self-control. Furthermore, play may support the flexibility of the child's transitioning between different types of play behaviors as they develop socially (Creasey et al., 1998). As a self-directed, open-ended, free, creative and unique activity, "play serves as a tool of the mind enabling children to master their own behavior" (Vygotsky, p.74) Play is a means for children to safely experiment with newly acquired skills and make mistakes without the pressure of achieving specific goals (Bruner, 1972).

Generally we can recognize when a child is playing. Yet scholars have found it somewhat difficult to come to an agreement on how to define or conceptualize play (Christie & Johnsen, 1983, Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Despite the varying definitions of play, there seem to be elements that commonly run throughout scholarly literature. These elements include; a) spontaneity, b) freedom from rules, c) active engagement, d) intrinsic motivation, e) a means rather than an end, f) positive effect on the child in most situations, and g) both people and objects (Christie, 1991). Christie identified several qualities that generally characterize children's play.

These characteristics include:

1. *nonliterality* - play events presented in a play frame or boundary that separates the play happening from everyday experiences.
2. *process over product* - the child's attention is focused on the activity rather than on the goal of play.
3. *positive effects* - play is usually marked by signs of pleasure and enjoyment.
4. *intrinsic motivation* - the motivation for play comes from within and activities are pursued for their own sake.
5. *free choice* - being freely chosen as opposed to being assigned.
6. *flexibility* - trying more novel combinations of ideas and behaviors.

Inherent to play is the theme that play is fun. At the same time, play has been perceived as a child's work, incorporating all of the developmental domains, and preceding speech and language. Sutton-Smith (1997) viewed play as the enactment of possibilities during which various options can be considered, alternatives incorporated, and flexible behavior developed. New skills are acquired which lead to higher quality play behaviors (Feeney & Magarick, 1984).

Play is an essential element for young children's development. Teale and Sulzby (1986) indicated that promoting regular parent-child interaction in the parenting process enhances a healthy family relationship. Literacy activities can be incorporated into the child's play environment, support cognitive development, and help to enhance the parental role as the child's first and most influential teacher (Nourot & Van Hoom, 1991). Children's play seems to serve some vital function other than a leisure activity which generally forces one to assume it is some intrinsic, innate function. One of these functions is the augmentation of young children's cognitive development. Johnson, Erschler and Lawton's (1982) work suggested that play may actually increase a child's IQ score. This study revealed a positive relationship between IQ scores and two types of play: dramatic and constructive play.

Play is an essential part of childhood and represents a major way for children to gain knowledge and skills that structure the development of their mental capacities. Through play experiences, children construct cognitive schemes that support the development of early literacy (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Roskos (1988) pointed out that young children between four and five years old who engaged in dramatic play and

pretended to be readers or writers exhibited early literacy activities. For example, they made up words, imitated adult writing by scribbling, and copied some shapes and letters.

The importance of play should not be devalued; it should be regarded as an integral part of parenting education, family life, and early childhood education. As a result, play helps children develop social skills, friendships, cooperative behavior, and conflict resolution abilities.

Play and Cognitive Development

Play and its relationship to cognitive development have been examined by researchers (Johnson et al., 1987; Van Hoom, 1993). As a child progresses through early childhood, play behavior becomes more complex and abstract, subsequently contributing to a child's overall development. Parten (1932) proposed that children progress through six cognitive levels of play, each being more complex than the previous one. "*Unoccupied behavior*" is when a child is not participating in play. "*Solitary play*" is when a child plays alone and physically isolates himself or herself making no attempt to interact with other children. "*Onlooker play*" is when a child watches other children. The child may talk to other children; however he or she does not engage in play behaviors with others. "*Parallel play*" refers to a child playing next to or in close proximity to another child playing with the same or similar toys and engaging in similar activities, but playing independently. The child does not interact or share materials directly with the other children. "*Associative play*" takes place when a child engages in social activities during play containing little or no organization or cooperation. "*Cooperative play*" involves a situation in which the child is actively engaged in an organized structured game or cooperative activity with one or more children.

Smilansky (1968) developed a system of classifying children's play behaviors primarily focusing on social play by expanding the cognitive play categories of Piaget.

"*Functional play*" occurs when a child engages in simple repetitive muscle movements with or without objects. "*Constructive play*" involves the manipulation of play materials to create something and is goal directed. "*Dramatic play*" refers to make-believe or imaginary play, in which an object of some kind may be used to replace a missing object. Lastly, "*Games with rules*" refers to organized play that clearly has a set of rules.

Smimlansky (1968) found kindergarten children's social status was significantly correlated

with IQ as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Similansky's classification system focused on the social aspects of children's play (e.g. language, social skills, creativity) that are important in relationship to cognitive development.

Play has been categorized in different ways, but for the purpose of this study, the focus will be on three types of play that generally develop in sequence and relate to cognitive development: exploratory play, constructive play and dramatic play. *Exploratory* play involves repeating an action in which joy is experienced from having mastered something new (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). This type of play predominates between birth and age two, but continues to be important throughout the early childhood years. Some examples are pounding and kneading dough, sifting sand, and running fingers through water. *Constructive* play is when children begin to use objects or materials to create a representation of something. For example a row of large blocks may represent a road and smaller blocks may represent cars. Various materials such as clay or play dough may be used to build something. Constructive play becomes increasingly complex over time and increases in frequency as a child moves from toddler to preschool years. However, constructive play does not replace exploratory play (Johnson et al., 1987). *Dramatic* play is a natural link between constructive play, as children use objects, actions, and language to create imaginary roles and situations (Van Hoom, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 1993). Through dramatic play, children naturally transform objects and actions into something different. A few examples are pretending to be a doctor, checking the blood pressure of a doll being treated as a pretend patient, using a block of wood as a telephone when making a phone call, transforming a keyboard into the control panel of a spaceship.

Vygotsky emphasized that when children transform meaning of objects or actions, they change a usual meaning into an imaginary one. A concrete object is then interpreted in an abstract way and is a precursor to reading and writing. Children extract meanings, assign interpretations and expand upon prior knowledge, which subsequently serves as the basis for communicative and cognitive development. Piaget theorized children move through cognitive developmental stages in a sequential, continuous manner. Therefore, cognitive developmental stages involve reorganizing characteristics of thinking processes in terms of perceiving and evaluating one's environment. For that

reason, each stage is more complex in comparison to the previous stage, marked by qualitative changes in the thinking and reasoning processes (Cohen & Schleser, 1984).

According to Piaget, children develop symbolic capabilities, as well as notable growth in language and mental imagery during the preoperational stage of development approximately from age 2 to age 6. Yet in the concrete operational stage children have a more complex organization of cognitive processing through systematic, well integrated logical operations than children in the preoperational stage. Therefore, they are able to take into account the perspective of others.

In a meta-analysis Fisher (1992) found strong positive effects of socio-dramatic play on cognitive and social development especially in terms of problem solving abilities. This offers support for Smilansky and Shefstya's (1990) findings that outline socio-dramatic play as being person oriented, involving social interactions, bodily movements, and object exploration. In addition, Simlansky and Shefstya (1991) focused specifically on socio-dramatic play being the most mature form of play.

Play enhances cognitive development and is a dynamic and constructive activity that facilitates communication skills, language, operational thinking, divergent thinking, problem solving, and overall metacognition (Johnson et al., 1999). Play and cognitive development appear to have a reciprocal relationship, as an increase in one leads to growth in the other. The development of cognitive skills involves learning how to form concepts and problem-solving (Athey, 1984). Play provides accessibility to other routes of information by helping to consolidate mastery of skills and concepts, promote and improve cognitive function, and support creativity. Through play, children learn to assimilate new information into their existing cognitive structures.

In summary, play is related to essential cognitive processes. Play is influential in the development of a child's ability to categorize, generalize, and problem-solve. As cognitive competencies increase, it appears as though the complexity of play also increases, leading to additional opportunities for cognitive growth.

Parental Beliefs about Play

Parent beliefs and cognitions influence encouragement and involvement in play activities with their preschool aged children (Rescorla, 1991). It has been maintained that parent beliefs about play assist in shaping developmental goals and expectations for

children (Stipek, 1992). McGillicuddy-De Lisi (1985) stated that “beliefs organize the world for individuals, enabling them to cope with everyday life without being overwhelmed by information and decision making demands” (p.333). In addition, beliefs are cognitions and refer to all of the processes by which experience is transformed, reduced, stored, elaborated, recovered, and used. Siegel (1985) suggested “knowledge is the major cognitive dimension of beliefs” (p.334). The study of parent beliefs and attitudes grew out of the recognition that parents as thinking beings interpret events that influence their actions and feelings (Goodnow, 1988). Beliefs afford parents a means for setting parenting priorities, assessing parenting success, and preserving parental self-efficacy.

There are three different roles that may be assumed by parents throughout playful interactions with children: (1) *Audience*, being available to acknowledge, admire, and perhaps at various points censor the child’s play activities. Cultures favoring an asymmetrical relationship between adults and children may be more inclined toward the audience role, (2) *Facilitator*, which can be viewed behaviorally. The adult participates in the child’s play activities, and guides the play in the direction of the cultural practices, and (3) *Partner*, having an egalitarian parent-child relationship founded on equality, co-playing, and engaging in interpersonal games. It is not known whether parents who believe in taking an audience role encourage different skills than parents who believe in the partner role.

Knight and Goodnow (1988) acknowledged that parental beliefs and practices interface with parental influence over children’s social and cognitive development. The salience of shared beliefs varies from individual to individual depending on a number of factors such as cognition, affect and value within the belief system (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1985). Most studies of parents’ beliefs have centered on the mothers; nevertheless, a series of studies including both mothers and fathers suggest each respectively have embraced different constructs of the developmental processes responsible for the child’s cognitive development (McGillicuddy-De-Lisi, 1985). Fathers more than likely refer to constructs such as innate characteristics and readiness, whereas mothers are more apt to refer to developmental constructs.

Bronfenbrenner (1979), through an ecosystems approach, pointed out that several important sources of beliefs for all individuals reside in the microsystem such as

personal experiences, social exchanges, and their own experiences as a child. These experiences subsequently contribute to parents' knowledge concerning child development. An important question relating to beliefs would be: how do the components of the belief system come together in different individuals, especially those with different cultural, racial, ethnic, social class, and educational experiences? Beliefs relate to children's social development, cognitive development, and academic success (Miller, 1986, 1988). Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney (1997), based on their study of 41 elementary students, concluded, "Parental beliefs were more strongly linked with child outcomes than parents' achievement-oriented behaviors" (p.527). Yan and Lin (2005) concluded that when a variety of practices such as parental support of extracurricular school activities and educational expectations were examined together, parental beliefs surpassed parental involvement as a significant influence on school readiness and successful academic outcomes. Levestein's (1970) Verbal Interaction Project's Mother-Child Home Program is a noteworthy example because it focuses on mother-child joint play, starting when the child was two years of age, resulting in the mother becoming the ultimate agent of cognitive enrichment. Several studies have indicated that qualitative changes in parent-child play occur with advances in children's cognitive and social competence (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, and Peay (1999) suggested that increased parent understanding of play helped them to assist the child's learning, especially in the areas of increased independence, creativity, and curiosity.

Nevertheless, Parker et al. (1999) reported parental strictness and aggravation had a negative impact, and other researchers found that warm, reciprocal parent-child interactions facilitated cognitive development (Bornstein, Hayes, O'Reilly, & Painter, 1996). Parental understanding of play at the end of the first year of Head Start was associated with increased skills acquired by their children. Roopnarine and Mounts (1985) found that parents who initiated fantasy play increased the level of receptive language in their preschool children, and significant positive gains were made in terms of school readiness. This study also revealed the importance of play related to socioemotional development and the opportunity to establish a reciprocal relationship between both home and classroom.

In summary, parental beliefs about play may assist parents in constructing their developmental goals and expectations for their children's participation in play at home and in early education programs. There are fewer research studies on the subject of parental beliefs about the value of play among low-income African American parents. Paramount to this inquiry is how parental beliefs or cognitions about play influence their encouragement. Implicit in a cultural-ecological model of parenting is the idea that culture shapes the development of parents' beliefs, perhaps involvement in the play activities of their children, and acceptance of play as a valuable and essential component for school readiness.

Low-Socioeconomic African American Families and Play

Rogoff (1990) suggested parental beliefs about play varied historically and continues to vary across cultures even today. Cultural aspects regarding the parent-child relationship and play have a significant role in shaping the amount of parental play with children. Schwartzman (1978) pointed out several decades ago that beliefs about certain kinds of play interventions for low-income children often resulted in an attempt to get children and parents of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds to adopt the play values of the middle class.

The largest group of children in the United States at-risk for failure in school is children from families living at the poverty level (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Over the past 30 years, poverty for children has increased and African American children are three times more likely to be poor than Caucasian and Hispanic children; one in four preschool children live in poverty in the United States (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Kao and Tienda (1995) pointed out that African American children are twice as likely to read below grade level and are at-risk for learning disabilities. Numerous factors contribute to educational outcomes of low SES preschool children. Low birth weight, nutrition, housing quality, and health care have very profound repercussions on cognitive functioning of the child (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Poverty appears to be a stronger predictor of school achievement than maternal schooling or family structure (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Hammer and Weiss (1999) indicated parental influence seems to be a factor that contributes to overcoming the detrimental effects of low-socioeconomic status.

Low-SES families and children seem to have far fewer encounters with educational toys, books, and educational experiences (Bradley et al, 2002); only half of preschoolers receiving public assistance have alphabet books in their homes compared to 97% of children from higher SES status homes. Children from low-SES families receive an average 25 hours of one-on-one picture book reading by the time they enter school compared to 1000 to 1700 hours experienced by children from middle-income households (Adams, 1990). Many parents, especially those experiencing low social or economic status with limited educational levels, may not believe in the importance of play for young children, or know how to play with their children (Gottfried, 1984). Borstein, O'Reilly, and Painter (1996) suggested that a child's play level could be elevated by adult interaction in the play situation.

Bishop and Chase (1971) attempted to provide an understanding of African American parent beliefs about play by focusing on the parents' conceptual frameworks, home as a play environment, and the link between creativity and parent's attitude toward play. Parent socioeconomic status, educational levels, cognitive styles and personality traits were cataloged. Findings of this study showed that mothers of creative children were more flexible in their conceptual style and had a more favorable attitude toward play in comparison to the mothers of less creative children. As a result, children who were determined more playful had mothers who displayed differentiated belief systems regarding play. Moreover, parental beliefs about growth and development influence practices and routines that are a part of a child's everyday life according to psycho-cultural theorists and researchers (Harkness & Super, 1996; Weisner, 1998; Whiting & Whiting, 1963). "Parent belief systems are related to general cultural beliefs and particular experiences of raising individual children in a specific time and place, a convergence of the public and the private, the shared and the personal" (Super & Harkness, 1997, p.17).

Qi, Kaiser, Milan, and Hancock (2006) noted low-income minority preschool children generally perform lower than expected on standardized tests of language abilities that are based on developmental norms. Furthermore, these authors argued children raised in poverty have a degree of difference in opportunities for word learning; there are fewer episodes of conversation in the home environment compared to well-educated parents using an extensive vocabulary. Low-SES children unfortunately lose significant

ground before entering school, suggesting early family interventions may be a key factor in promoting success in school.

The effect of income on children's cognitive stimulation in the home environment has significant implications. Play is not necessarily dependent on income and could potentially contribute to the positive development of a child. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore low-income African American parental beliefs about the value of play and the play experiences that they believe are significant for language development, critical thinking, social experiences, and school readiness.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

A Qualitative Research Approach

Miles and Huberman (1994) write that researchers can use qualitative methods to make sense of individual experiences through the in-depth study of everyday life, social experiences, and beliefs of the participants. This qualitative research study was used to explore parental beliefs about the value of play, language development, critical thinking, social competency, and play experiences perceived significant within the understudied group of lower income African American parents of children in Head Start.

Population and Sample

There are flexible rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry; sample size depends on what you want to know and the purpose of the inquiry (Patton, 2002). When deciding on a sample size, one must consider if the sampling strategy supports the study's purpose (Patton). Purposive sampling is when the investigator selects participants because of their characteristics such as being an informant who knows the information required, is willing to reflect on the phenomena of interest, has the time, and is willing to participate (Spradley, 1979). Purposive sampling was used in this qualitative study to ensure that all participants were low income African American parents of children in Head Start with interest in participating in a study about their beliefs about play (Creswell, 1998).

In this study, the sampling approach was as follows: African American mothers of children attending the largest Head Start Center located in the central region of Florida were recruited through an interest flyer and personal contact with the Head Start Center director. The center was chosen because it was the largest center in the area with a profile of 133 students, 14 teachers (2 per class), 1 center supervisor, 2 family health advocates, and seven classrooms with a ratio of 10:1 and a maximum of 20 students per classroom. Also, of potential centers initially contacted by the researcher, this center yielded the highest number of interested participants meeting the criterion of being African American.

Head Start was chosen because it is an established national, federally funded program that provides free comprehensive services for low-income preschool children

and their families. Services address educational, medical, vision, dental, nutritional, and mental health needs. A variety of learning experiences are provided to foster intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Parent involvement was an essential part of the selected program, achieved by parents volunteering in the classrooms on a weekly basis and being engaged in activities to help their children develop early reading and math skills. The curriculum did not directly stress play as a functional component of cognitive development. Instead, it stressed school readiness skills as the main focus.

All potential participants were considered low-income based on Head Start criteria and according to federal guidelines for income (Appendix A) used for the total number of family members living in a household. Initially twenty-four parents indicated interest. However, at the time the researcher contacted potential participants to confirm participation, ten potential participants no longer had phone numbers that were working, and two were no longer interested in participating. Twelve African American parents or primary caregivers of children ranging from 3-5 years old enrolled in the Head Start Program ended up participating in the study. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 59, were all female, and were parenting two to seven children including those in Head Start.

Procedure

Approval first was obtained from the Florida State University Committee on Human Subjects (Appendix A) to conduct this study. Directors or other administrators of each potential and the final choice of Head Start Center then were contacted, and an Agency Permission Form (Appendix B) was used to gain permission to contact parents who might participate in interviews. After the researcher was granted permission by the university and selected Center, she greeted parents as they arrived at the center to pick up their children. A Participant Recruitment Form (Appendix C) was filled out by 24 parents with names and phone numbers for future contact. A brief explanation of the purpose of the research was given to each of these parents who showed an interest in participating. The researcher then contacted each through a follow-up phone call to confirm interest in volunteering to be interviewed. At that time, the resulting 12 participants were presented in-depth information regarding the purpose of the interview.

Subsequently, two interviews were conducted at the program site in a private area and ten were conducted at the participant's home. Both situations seemed to

equally assure confidentiality and comfort in a familiar environment. At the beginning of the interview each participant was asked to sign and was given a copy of an Informed Consent Agreement (Appendix D) to participate in a tape recorded interview regarding beliefs about play experiences with her children, the value of play, and its influence on preschool children's cognitive performance. Participants were informed about use of the information, and they were asked if they had any questions concerning participation in the study. Demographic information such as marital status, age, income, educational level, age of children, and number of children in the Head Start Program using a Family Information Form (Appendix E) was collected at the time the participant agreed to take part in the interview process. Participants described their beliefs and experiences as prompted by a Parent Interview Guide (Appendix F) and short video clips of children playing.

Interviews began during June of 2008; the last interview was conducted in August of 2008. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 40 minutes. The researcher conducted all interviews using two recorders, one for back up purposes. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Interviews were concluded with a thank you and a \$20.00 appreciation gift card. Participants were given a contact number for the researcher in case of any questions and request of results. Audiotapes and transcribed data of all participants were secured in two separate locked files.

Instrumentation

Bogan and Biklen (1992) describe the interview as a means by which researchers "gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words, so the researcher can develop insights about how the subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 96). This study used in-person, semi-structured interviews. According to Patton (2002), the benefit of the semi-structured interview is that the same questions are asked of each participant facilitating analysis by "making responses easy to find and compare" (p.346). Thus, semi-structured but open-ended questions were developed (Appendix G) to address categories of play such as cognitive development and learning from cooperative play. Parents were asked about beliefs using questions such as, "Do you think play is an important part of your child's mental and physical development? Explain".

As suggested by Rogoff (1990), participants were asked about parental involvement in play because the parent-child relationship has a significant role in shaping the amount of parental play with children and can vary according to cultural and economic background. Parents also were asked to remember their own play experiences with the prompt, “Remembering your own play experiences as a child, what did you love to play?” This information provided a general impression of participants’ thoughts about play and seemed to create a comfortable environment to establish rapport. Interview questions were listed in categories of, skills, beliefs, and involvement for the purpose of coding data.

Interviews also included showing video clips of play titled Marble Fun and Block Builders, High Scope Educational Research Foundation at (<http://www.highscope.org/>) The first video involved a preschool teacher with approximately eight preschool children seated at a round table; she introduced the marbles to the children by describing them as glass balls and included tubes for the children to use and construct different levels to roll the marbles through. In Block Builders, the children were given different colored blocks to stack, sort, and build into different shapes; some worked cooperatively while others worked independently. The teacher in the clip asked each child to explain what he or she was making and to think of other ways the blocks could be used. These videos were used to elicit further information from the participants with the interview question, “What do you think the children are learning?”

Pilot Test

It was essential to determine early in the research study whether the proposed interview questions were adequate to explore parental beliefs regarding play that constituted the purpose of the study. The first two interviews served as a pilot test to determine whether each question was valid or understood in the context in which it was asked and useful for generating meaning and insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). After the two interviews were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber and checked for accuracy by the researcher. The researcher then analyzed each interview in order to determine emerging themes through a process of coding recurring responses of the participants. The coding process is described in the next section on data analysis but it led to the researcher’s conclusion that no adjustments were necessary and the interview guide was used as constructed. Because no

adjustments were made, the pilot study participants' data were included in the study's final results.

Data Analysis

Coding and Themes

Rubin and Rubin (1995) have suggested interview transcripts should be read and reread in order to begin the coding process. Three copies of the original transcripts were made available so the researcher could mark and make analytical notes during the coding process. Each transcript first was read in its entirety for general understanding and impressions; a second reading generated preliminary notes and code words for key concepts that seemed significant. Data were highlighted as common language use occurred and were sorted into categories ranging from general to more specific. As the process continued, a color-coding system was developed to relate data to the research questions and patterns began to emerge.

Participants were asked the same questions in the same order, for consistency of coding to simplify the process of searching for patterns of answers and to ensure focus on specific characteristics of the data (Morse & Richards, 2002, p.111). Coding began with the identification of descriptive words and phrases to summarize key ideas expressed within individual participants' answers to interview questions. Certain initial codes were repeated and confirmed as multiple participants stated similar ideas. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe pattern codes-data units aggregated into thematic groups that go beyond description as being "even more influential and explanatory than descriptive codes" (p. 57). Pattern coding was particularly useful in identifying common and emerging themes among interviews. Through the process of continual re-sorting and reorganizing themes, 10 themes emerged. These were eventually collapsed into eight themes as initial smaller categories were combined into a larger more focused category. For example, inside and outside play was collapsed into the theme of family influence to incorporate responses related to bonding time with nuclear and extended family members.

As coding and interpretation of data continued, three final themes with varying sub-themes were identified, and a brief description of each theme is shown in Table 2. For example, the theme of readiness was illustrated by parents' comments such as: "I

have the line paper for kindergarten to practice his letters, crayons, board games, puzzles, the matching games, and hands on activities to help with reading,” and “We provide play materials that will prepare them by playing school, to write their name. Coloring is an awesome thing for a child to do; it doesn’t seem like much but they are creating and practicing staying on an activity which is getting ready for the school environment and being with other children by sitting down and actually paying attention to what the teacher says.”

The two video clips of children engaged in activities in a preschool classroom setting, lasting three minutes in length, were shown to each participant to gain further insight and meaning regarding their beliefs about play. Data generated from interview questions were compared with responses regarding the videos. Subsequently, the analysis determined that parent views of their own children’s play supported activities occurring in the videos. For example, one parent stated, “One child was learning matching and colors, and some of them learning to put it [blocks] in a straight line. One child was learning to balance the blocks or stack them; others were building a house and learning from one another by copying each other. They were playing and learning at the same time.” Another parent commented on how her own child played with the blocks and marbles by stating “My son likes to play with blocks building things, making different figures and that helps him learn grouping and counting. He plays marbles a lot with the other children it promotes mental, physical and imaginary play.”

Interview transcripts provide raw data that are interesting on their own. However, they cannot portray the participant’s experiences or understandings without systematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), thus stressing the importance of the above coding and categorizing steps in this study. Qualitative inquiry does not readily lend itself to exact replication due to the influence of the individual researcher’s personality. However, the interview guide and resulting themes here are expected to be useful for other researchers who wish to conduct a study of the same interest.

Validity and Trustworthiness

The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational and analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size (Patton, 2002, p. 245). Some authors have argued that reliability and validity have no place in qualitative inquiry. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) insist that qualitative inquiry is subjective, interpretive, and time and context bound. Therefore “truth” is relative and “facts” depend upon individual perceptions. This study followed Lincoln and Guba who recommend that qualitative researchers replace reliability and validity with the concepts of trustworthiness defined trustworthiness as: truth value, credibility of the inquiry, applicability or the transferability of the results and consistency or the dependability of the results.

Qualitative research is evaluated through its level of trustworthiness. The researcher called participants to check the accuracy of how their experiences were described in order to increase the trustworthiness of data collected. Research findings were shared with participants to obtain feedback and validate that their views and experiences were interpreted accurately. The goal of the interview process was to understand how participants understand and make meaning of their experience. “If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer then it has gone a long way toward validity” (Seidman, 1998, p.17). Trustworthiness of resulting themes was enhanced by interviewing a number of participants. The researcher was able to connect participants’ experiences and check their comments within the data from various segments of the population (Seidman, 1998, p.17). For example, Karen, the youngest participant at 24 years old stated, “[My child] has learning toys that teach her different words, shapes and how to count.” The oldest participant at 59 years old, Edna similarly stated, “She has plenty of games, puzzles and everything to prepare her for school. She has an alphabet on the refrigerator.” Such comments are consistent with each other and demonstrate a common belief of providing materials expected to enhance school readiness.

Comments about the videos were compared to comments from interview questions. For example, Tracy’s response to an interview question and the videos were very much related: “He likes to build stuff and playing with other kids. They talk about

what they are building so they learn from each other. When he got to Head Start he didn't like to share but being around other kids he learned to share, he learned not to go over and grab something from someone else if they were playing with it." After watching the video Tracy responded, "Order, like when she [teacher] was telling them to start with the smaller ones [marbles], they were also learning how to play with other children and, uh... structure because she had them following directions and one little boy associated the marbles with a ball, so that shows you he was thinking as he played and that might help other kids to think." This qualitative researcher attempted to follow Bogdan and Biklen (1998) in not making absolute assertions of truth; instead, the claim is that the resulting themes are plausible given the data.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study's overarching goal was to identify beliefs about play among low-income African American parents of preschool children attending a Head Start Program. Specifically two research questions were asked: What are parent beliefs about the value of play and influence on language development, critical thinking, and social competency? What play experiences do parents perceive as being significant for language development, critical thinking, social competency, and school readiness?

In this chapter, the participants first are described in terms of background and vignettes of their own play memories. Then, findings in answer to the first research question are presented in terms of the first major theme of play's value. Findings in answer to the second research question are presented in terms of the second theme of family influence and the third theme of environment. Finally, a summary of findings in relation to the research questions is provided. Overall, positive parent beliefs about the developmental significance of play were indicated by statements such as, "If I play with my child at home it will help my child get ready for kindergarten," and "I *think* play helps them to be more social and helps them to learn. My daughter loves to sit and figure out puzzles; it helps them to problem solve too."

Participants

Demographic Information

Table 1 demonstrates the demographic break down of each participant, indicating age, gender, marital status, level of education, and income range according to federal guidelines for poverty level in 2008. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 59 with an average age of 33.3. All 12 participants were female, 4 were married, 2 were separated, 5 were single and one was widowed. The relationship of the caregiver to the child attending Head Start is indicated, as well as the age and gender of siblings in each family group. All of the participants lived in the in the central region of Florida. All participants were African American.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name	Age	Gender	Relationship To Child	Marital Status	Income Range (FGAI)	Education Level	Age of Siblings	Gender of Siblings
Minnie	36	Female	Mother	Married	15,000 20,000	1.5 yrs. college		
Linda	41	Female	Mother	Married	15,000 20,000	1 yr. college		
Sharon	27	Female	Mother	Married	25,000 30,000	HS Graduate	4,6	2 males
Vivian	41	Female	Mother	Single	40,000 50,000	12 th grade No Diploma	4	1 female
Theresa	26	Female	Mother	Separated	25,000 30,000	Associate's Degree	9,7,18 mos.	3 males 1 female
Joyce	31	Female	Mother	Single	25,000 30,000	HS Graduate	12,9,1	3 males 1 female
Kathy	26	Female	Mother	Separated	10,000 20,000	HS Graduate	10,9,6	3 males
Edna	59	Female	Grandmother/ Legal Caregiver	Widowed	25,000 30,000	Bachelor's Degree	17 yrs. old	1 male
Alice	29	Female	Mother	Single	20,000 25,000	HS Graduate	7 yrs. old	1 female
Karen	24	Female	Mother	Single	5,000 10,000	HS Graduate	2yrs.old 4 mos.	2 males
Selena	25	Female	Mother	Married	20,000 30,000	11 th grade	6yrs. old	1 male 1 female
Tracy	35	Female	Mother	Single	20,000 25,000	HS Graduate	19,13,2	3females

FGAI-Federal Guidelines for Annual Income 2008 (Poverty Guidelines U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)

Vignettes

Early in each interview the researcher tried to capture general impressions by asking the participant to remember personal play experiences as a child. I believe that asking parents to describe a memory of their own play experiences helped to create a comfortable and open atmosphere and to establish rapport. Each vignette provides an idea of each participant's past play experiences in light of her current situation. All names are pseudonyms.

Minnie is a 36-year-old married mother of a four-year-old who was quite active in the educational process of her daughter and preparing her for kindergarten through the Head Start Program. She has one and a half years of college and is focused on completing her education soon and becoming a role model for her daughter.

This is hard, let's see, hum, I remember playing at my grandmother's house all day in the summertime outside with my brother and cousins. When school was in we got to play about an hour after we finished our homework. We loved to play hide and seek.

Linda is 41 and married with one year of college. She was very excited about being interviewed and very interested in the research topic indicated by her comment, "I think my daughter benefits from different kinds of play which enhance her ability to interact with other children."

As a child I would play house. I like to decorate and design things. I would find things outside to make a home.

Sharon is a married mother of three. She is 27 years old with a high school education and employed as a Sous Chef in training at a large local restaurant in the Central Florida area. She and her husband usually take turns each evening playing with their children by providing educational games to promote family time and bonding.

I liked to play dolls. I played with my Cabbage.... laughter, Patch Kid, that's how I learned to braid hair. We didn't go outside much because I had one parent, my mother, who worked two jobs so me my three sisters, and other would mostly play in the bedroom or in the yard sometimes, but we didn't go outside very often.

Vivian indicated that with her older children, play time was not a consideration due to working long hours when they were preschool age. At the age of 41, single with a 12th grade education, she finds that she is able to be more involved in her five year old son's play activities and sees the benefit of being able to interact with her son especially during play time.

I loved to play the "Name IT" game. You see you have to find something you see. My brothers and sisters, we were either at home or on the road or at a cousin's house and we started having competitions between us. It caused us to learn the names of different things.

Theresa is expecting her fifth child at the age of 27, is separated from her husband, is raising four other children, and has an Associate's Degree in Criminal Justice. She was feeling overwhelmed with juggling her schedule and having enough time to be involved with her children's play at this time of this interview. Although she is separated, she tries to encourage the children's father to participate in their play activities by having family outings and letting the children to visit their father's house every other weekend.

"Hide and Seek" was my favorite game to play when I was a child because I was mostly at my grandmother's house and played with my cousins. During the summer we would play all day outdoors until it was time for supper and then we would go out again until the street lights came on.

Joyce is a 31-year-old single mother of four children including her four year old daughter that attends Head Start. Joyce is a high school graduate who is thinking about returning to school in preparation for finding a more lucrative job so she can earn more money to provide for her family.

I grew up mostly up North so I loved winter, playing in the snow making snow angels, we'd...(laughter...) have plenty of snowball fights. I remember, yes, that's right sledding down this big ole hill in back of the school on plastic garbage bags. Oh! We had so much fun and by the time we went in we'd be soakin' wet.

Kathy, 26 years old, is extremely busy with four very active boys ages 10, 9, 6 and 5. She is separated from her husband and trying to maintain balance in the

household. Kathy felt being involved in their play activities was very important. In fact, they were all planning to go swimming at the local community pool the day of the interview because it was very hot and humid.

Growing up I loved to roller skate. I would skate up and down the driveway for hours and my little sister would watch me.

Edna is a 59-year-old retired teacher, grandmother, and widow who lost her husband two years ago; she adopted her granddaughter due to the biological mother's involvement with drugs. Unfortunately, Edna was in a car accident last year that left her with limited ability to get around and actively participate in her granddaughter's play activities. Most of the time, the 17-year-old brother was given the task of playing games and outdoor activities with his little sister.

I liked to be the momma and pretend to cook and sew. I liked to keep house. Ever since I was small I liked those things. I would play with old milk cartons, old butter dishes, cereal boxes and tell my two younger sisters what to do. I was the Momma!

Alice is a 29-year-old high school graduate who is single; she has two daughters' who are 5 and 7 years old. The family is from the Caribbean. Alice indicated that due to her work schedule she was hardly ever home, but she would like to spend more time with her girls.

I liked to play like I was grown, like doing the shopping, driving a car and buying stuff. Where I lived was a big ole apartment complex and me and the other kids would use old toilet paper rolls to make a micro-phone to sing in them and old boxes set up to look like a gas pedal and brake to pretend driving a car.

Karen, the youngest of the participants is 24 years of age; she is single with three children ages 5, 4 and 2 months. She has a high school diploma and is struggling to run her household on an income of \$10,000 a year. Karen feels she has very little time to be involved in her children's play activities.

When I was a child I loved to draw and play with my baby dolls. I mostly would like to dress my dolls up, do their hair, and just play like they were kids. Pretty much I stayed in my room drawing and playing dolls.

Selena has five-year-old twins attending Head Start; they have an older sister who's soon to be seven years old. Selena is 25 years old and has completed the 11th grade. She is married and would like to pursue a GED to complete her education. She stated, "I think that some of the ways kids play helps them act out their feelings and helps them not be so tense or upset. When they play nicely it is because they are happy."

My thing growing up was sports, kick ball, soft ball and hang out with other kids in the neighborhood. Mostly my house was the hang out spot. I wasn't a girlie kind of person. Bicycles, balls and anything that was athletic is what I was into.

Tracy is a 35-year-old single mother with a high school education. She has four children ages 19, 13, 5 and 2. Her 5-year-old son just completed Head Start and will be going to kindergarten this fall. He was very curious about why I was interviewing his mother and wanted to answer some of the questions. She had a difficult time keeping the children quiet during the interview.

My cousins lived with us and we would play, Double Dutch, Kick Ball, Red Light-Green Light, and Mother-May-I for long periods of time outside in the street and the driveway in front of my house.

Participants in this study had life experiences very distinct from each other, yet their childhood play experiences were very similar. For example, eight of the participants loved to play outside games such as hide and seek, roller skating, jump rope, and kick ball which relate to the value of play as a release of energy. All eight participants who played active sports and games mentioned playing as a social activity with cousins, siblings and neighborhood children. Four participants would play quieter activities such as house with their dolls or school, which involved play interactions that relate to language development and social skills. Two participants played these quieter games with siblings, and two played alone. Parents seemed fond of their memories, perhaps as a way to relate to their children's play. Importantly for this study, it appears the play activities participants engaged in as a child may have some impact on forming their beliefs about play as parents to be described further in chapter Four.

Three Categories of Themes and Subthemes

Three thematic areas emerged regarding parental beliefs about play as related to development and important types of play experiences: (1) play's value, (2) family influence, and (3) environment. Each will be described and illustrated with quotations from participants. Table 2 displays a categorization of the themes and related subthemes. This can be used as a reference as the themes are described in more detail.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
1. Play's Value	Creativity Release of energy Language development Readiness Academics Sensory skills Transition to kindergarten Play Interactions
2. Family Influence	Nuclear family Extended family Supportive interactions Bonding time
3. Environment	Siblings or only child Community/School Inside and outside play

Theme 1: Play's Value

The first research question was: What are parent beliefs about the value of play and play's influence on language development, critical thinking, and social competency? Because beliefs and values are tied to basic definitions, it was important to first discover parental definitional knowledge about play. Most of the participants viewed play as being valuable in promoting creativity along with social, emotional, and school readiness. They brought up skills such as sharing with other children, developing language through recognition and use of sight words, and demonstrating self-discipline during social interactions within their peer group. All participants viewed play as valuable in the realm of promoting multiple and far-reaching benefits: cognitive development, release of energy and stress through physical exercise, social and emotional growth, and decision making or problem solving skills.

Creativity. The subtheme of creativity was strongly evident and became apparent in numerous responses. Participants described ways that children engage in creative thinking.

Minnie: Yeah, it helps her to be creative in where she can pretend to be someone else; she tries to mock what you say and studies everything you do. "Well, Mommy what does that word mean?" You will be like huh? She just wants to know what words mean. She knows her manners in play, what she can do and not do, so she will stop and think about if it is right to do or not. For example, she heard someone say a curse word and she was like, "Mommy that is a bad word isn't it, I can't say that word, right?"

Edna: I most definitely think play helps child to be creative because when they play they learn to use imagination and create different environments through play. Play is just a very productive way of learning.

Alice: Yes, play helps her to imagine different things, she can build or draw, or if she is playing with different kids...it gives her ideas and helps her to be creative.

Vivian: I feel like if a child does not have that time to release their energy and keep it bottled up inside that can either go positive or negative. He needs that time to just wander free and be creative.

Creativity was an important characteristic of play. Participants agreed in one form or another that children are naturally creative and see the world in new and fresh ways. Each participant commented on the various activities that promote the use on imagination and how this helps their children's language development, social skills, and respect for other's feelings.

Release of energy. Parents suggested that play is a way children develop their small and gross motor skills and get excess energy out. In addition, they believed that play functions as a stress reliever by providing time to relax.

Karen: Play is a time for children to wind down and to release pent up energy.

Joyce: Children get stressed out and need to release all those tensions some way and play is what children do.

Tracy: They have to burn off that energy, playing helps them to do that. It's good for their health it keeps them active and not become obese.

Participants commented on how important it is for children to have an outlet to release pent up energy and relax from daily stressors for subsequent health and long term benefits which can be practiced through adulthood.

Language development. Participants expressed thoughts about how play is instrumental in developing language skills.

Edna: Yes, play does help language development, because when they play they talk a lot about what they are playing.

Theresa: Playing is a time when they get to express themselves freely and usually during play they pick up words from other children especially if they are a little older.

Joyce: My daughter loves to play school and she loves to write and learn different words, which helps to build her vocabulary.

Selena: My daughter is always correcting my boy's speech and when they interact with different children they meet, they are constantly learning new words and that increases their vocabulary and language development.

Most of the participants believed that play enhanced children's ability to engage in word use and express their thoughts. However, parents noted that some types of play could be more conducive to such positive development than others. For example, Selena didn't see the value of video games in terms of promoting language development or creative thinking. She felt reading books was more important in preparing a child for kindergarten.

Readiness. There was a general consensus among the participants that play activities at home and in preschool generally enhance a child's readiness for kindergarten. All participants provided educational play materials in the home to enhance their child's ability to perform well in preschool. The researcher asked the question, "Is it important to provide games, puzzles and other play materials in the home? What do you provide for your child at home?" All of the participants believed it was important to provide materials in the home that would promote kindergarten readiness skills as well as opportunities to practice higher thinking skills through problem solving activities. Use of computers in the home also was promoted by some parents as a means of aiding kindergarten readiness. Parents seemed to believe that use of a variety of materials in the home provided a positive transition from preschool to kindergarten.

Academics. Participants believed preschool age children learn best by being able to explore and manipulate various materials and engaging in hands-on activities. They related play with a purpose to help children to figure out things, practice new skills and gain confidence in their academic abilities.

Minnie: All sorts of puzzles, books, and she has a little computer...I got her different stuff. I work with her and before she started preschool she could recognize her ABC's and sounds of some letters. This way she will not be behind [kindergarten].

Linda: I think games are good for kids because if you give them a puzzle and to me it's like can they figure it out. Some children can and some children can't. I think it is important for them to have play materials in the home; my kids basically have all the games, puzzles, books and computer CD's to aid reading and language development.

Vivian: I have the line paper for kindergarten to practice his letters, crayons, board games, puzzles, the matching games and hands on activities to help with reading.

Edna: She has plenty of games, puzzles and everything to prepare her for school. She has an alphabet on the refrigerator.

Sensory skills. The interviewed participants believed sensory skills developed as children experimented with a variety of materials; they could practice problem solving through activities that promote the use of the senses.

Tracy: I have a ball for the baby but my son plays with it too, I guess that helps him to learn his shapes and colors...sometimes the baby takes it from him... (laughter).

Kathy: Materials pretty much keep a child active and out of trouble and away from all that bad stuff. I like for her to draw and play with lots of learning things.

Transition to kindergarten. Parents commented that their children build self-discipline; they learn to share, cooperate, build their vocabulary, and make independent choices setting the stage for transitioning from preschool to kindergarten.

Alice: It is very important to have materials to help your kids to get ready for school; I get puzzles to help her solve the pattern of putting it together. She has games, dolls, stuffed animals, electronic games and games to play on the computer. I don't like computer so much but there are games to help her spell words and know her different letters.

Selena: We provide play materials that will prepare them by playing school to write their name, coloring is an awesome thing for a

child to do, it doesn't seem like much but they are creating and practicing staying on a activity which is getting ready for the school environment and being with other children by sitting down and actually paying attention to what the teacher says.

School readiness is a primary goal of many intervention programs such as Head Start that are designed to serve children from low-income families. Parents believed that play could enhance a child's readiness for school by facilitating academic skills and the cognitive development necessary for transition to kindergarten.

Play interactions. Several benefits of play interactions related to social competency and discipline were identified:

Vivian: He is very polite and not selfish and he acts out what he is playing with his toys.

Theresa: Sometimes I have to discipline him when he plays because he likes to play WWF [wrestling]. He gets too rough and can't understand why he can't throw his sister on the ground like he sees on T.V.

Joyce: My daughter likes puzzles and sometimes they are too hard for her but I can see her trying to figure out where each piece belongs. This helps her to build self-discipline not to give up and try to figure it out.

Parents commented on the fact that play promotes self-discipline and better peer relationships. Furthermore, they seemed to think that interactive play with peers leads to problem-solving and social competency. These benefits were recognized as helping the child to be less miserable, more socially competent, and balanced. Many of the participants generally had positive knowledge about play and the broad effect play will have on their children's academics in school.

Theme 2: Family Influence

The second research question was: What play experiences do parents perceive as being significant for language development, critical thinking, social competency and school readiness? The second theme pertained to parent influence as being important in ensuring that play experience was directed toward positive benefits. Participants also

believed it is important to be involved for bonding time and as a support for their children. In fact, they assumed that all family members should be involved in their children's play.

Linda: Very important! Very important! To spend time with your kids, because you're interacting with your child you know what they are doing and what they can and can't do when you are talking to them. You know what they need help in and what they don't. From kindergarten on up spend time, go to their school check on them.

Vivian: We have a very big family and everyone is supportive and involved in the play activities. We get together and dance, play football, cook lots of food and make sure the children have good times playing. He has to know there is someone he can trust and that it is ok to be able to be free and he has that support from all family members.

Karen: It is very important to be active with your child to show you love and care about them that you interested in what they are learning and enjoy.

Sharon: It is important for children to know you are there for them and involved in what they are interested in, it builds a stronger relationship and makes your kids comfortable to talk to you about different situations.

Minnie: My mom and dad, especially my father play with my daughter. Like the other day my dad has a mole on his back and my daughter was pretending to be a doctor and said she had to operate on him to fix his back, so...it was funny because she made my dad lay down while she put a cloth on his back.

Selena: Last week we all went to the park and played kick ball, softball, swimming. All the family, aunties, uncles and cousins and they bring all their kids and they all have a fun time, everyone is

involved in their play. We get them tired and bring them back home and they go to sleep.

Participants indicated the importance of having family bonding time with their children through various nuclear and extended family activities. They indicated inside play gives the child options to be active and creative, but it also provides important experiences to build family togetherness and relationships.

Theme 3: Environment

The home and community were important to parents for the child to be prepared emotionally and socially for the school environment, which encompasses the ecological relationships in terms of the home to school and school to home connection. Parents believed that Head Start was a vital connection to play in the home environment, providing support to enhance the achievement of their preschool children. Parents seemed to believe in the Head Start philosophy and thought the Head Start-home experiences of both academics and play strengthened each other.

Selena: It is important to be aware of the surroundings your child is learning and interacting in so you can support those activities.

Minnie: School and home play a big part in the activities of my child and should support each other. So I get involved with as many school activities as possible. We are actively involved in our church and its extra support for our family.

Edna: You have to let your kids know you are interested in what they do at school and support the teachers. Everywhere they go and participate in activities is important to be involved. It goes back to if you don't have time for them they may get involved in negative activities in the neighborhood.

Karen: I try to volunteer in my child's class as much as I can because it is important to let your child and the teacher know your care about what is happening at school and support learning at home.

Participants commented that it is important for the child to feel a sense of support and cooperation between their parents and teacher creating a sense of

equilibrium and feeling of security in the child's environment that further promotes play as an avenue to academic success.

Video Clips: Block Builders and Marble Fun

Each participant was shown two three minute video clips of preschool children in a classroom environment. One clip titled Block Builders <http://highscope.org> showed children engaged in a small group process using blocks to create various structures. The second clip titled Marble Fun <http://highscope.org> showed children being challenged to use tubes and other objects to experiment and problem solve ways in which marbles could be used. After watching the video clips each participant was asked; What do you think the children are learning? Do they look like they are having fun? Representative answers were:

- Sharon:** One was learning matching and colors, and some of them learning to put it [blocks] in a straight line. One was learning to balance the block. Some were trying to build a house and others were copying off other children. Yeah, they were playing and learning at the same time.
- Vivian:** How to interact with each another, work together, play together. Learning how to share, how to get along, how to speak to one another, temperance. They were learning and playing at the same time.
- Tracy:** Order, like when she was telling them to start with the smaller ones [marbles], they were also learning how to play with other children and, uh... structure because she had them following directions and some little boy associated the marbles with a ball, so that show you he was thinking as he played and that might help other kids to think.
- Joyce:** Learning how to connect colors together, learning big and small. They are learning to share, team work, and working together. Looked like they were having fun but I be scared to give little kids marbles they might put it in their mouth.

- Edna:** They are using fine motor skills, by using building blocks, touching things, seeing the different shapes and using imaginary to make different things. Imaginary, it all combines the blocks and marbles to imaginary play as mathematical, skill, creativity, reading, counting, academics combined with play.
- Alice:** Eye hand coordination, two little girls were learning how to work together, team work.
- Selena:** They were learning motor skills. Build and play with others without fighting. They were getting along but teaching each other because something one kid couldn't do the other kid was right there to back them up and help them do it, which taught them how to do it on their own. This is considered play but a lot of people wouldn't think that, they would think they just putting blocks together, but they are playing and learning, they are learning additional motor skills that they are going to need when they get up there and start going to school and writing and doing everything they do in kindergarten. Those kids looked like they were 3 or 4 years old and they knew to put all the colors together in line and that is good development.
- Theresa:** Yeah, they learned ummm...Yeah, like I said they are learning how to put stuff together.

These comments regarding the children in the video support the participants' beliefs about their children's activities of play developed in the major themes. They similarly spoke about how block and marble play taught children to work cooperatively, share, use sensory skills, follow directions, use fine and gross motor skills related to holding a pencil or using scissors, learn their colors and shapes, build, pretend, problem solve, and in multiple ways develop readiness skills for transitioning to kindergarten. Parent perspectives concerning the videos similarly focused on the broad value of play in social and academic development.

Summary of Themes in Relation to the Research Questions:

Three themes related to play's value, family influence, and environment helped to answer the research questions. Table 3 shows a summary of the relationship of each question with themes discovered in this study.

Table 3

Themes in Relation to the Research Questions

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Related Themes</i>
What are parent beliefs about the value of play and its influence on language development, critical thinking and social competency?	Play's Value: creativity, release of energy, and language development, parent beliefs about play, play interactions, sensory skills, readiness, academics, and transition from preschool to kindergarten.
What play experiences do parents perceive as being significant for language development, critical thinking, social competencies and school readiness?	Family Influence: bonding time, parent play experiences, nuclear and extended family, and supportive interactions. Environment: only child, siblings, school, community, inside and outside play

Parent Play Memories and Beliefs about Children's Play

For the final phase of analysis, the researcher traced each participant according to her own memories of play, beliefs about play for her own children, and insights regarding video clips. This analysis indicated several patterns. First, the eight parents who remembered active physical games and sports most vividly from their childhood focused on creativity, language development and academic readiness, and release of

stress and tension. All eight of these parents noted that children naturally discuss rules, try out new words, incorporate numbers and counting, negotiate meaning, and express their thoughts. In other words, they are learning foundational skills for school. For example, Selena, who played kick ball and soft ball with children in the neighborhood, believed that play allowed her son to enhance his speech through peer interaction and enhance kindergarten readiness through listening to others.

Six of these eight parents also thought play was very valuable for facilitating creativity. Alice, for example, played shopping with old boxes, cars with large boxes, and singing with an empty toilet paper roll “microphone.” For her child, she emphasized the creative value of play and provided materials to engage her child in learning. Two participants additionally associated play with a positive release of energy and tension, not surprising given the active nature of their own fond memories.

The social aspect of learning was mentioned by four parents. For example, Vivian (who had competitions with her brother and cousin playing the Name It game) commented that “my son is learning to be polite” by playing with others. Other benefits of social play were development of manners, mimicking older children or adults, listening to others, and learning respect.

Four of the parents had enjoyed quieter types of play, two with siblings and two alone. Interestingly there seemed to be no correlation with the value associated with play. Karen, who liked to play with dolls and draw quietly, focused on “winding down and releasing pent up energy” as a value for her child. Edna, who liked to play “the momma” in her childhood, associated play’s value with language development and creativity in her child.

Linda, who liked to decorate and design, thought play’s value related to developing language and academic skills. One interesting finding about Linda is that she played mostly in her room due to her mother working two jobs, but she emphasized the family influence of showing love and care to her children. This raises an interesting question about whether or not children with absentee parents feel a lack of support for their play. Certainly, she emphasized the relational aspect of play for her child.

Many of the twelve parents indicated the importance of getting together with family members and spending time with their children regardless of their own type of

play memories. Similarly, they emphasized the relationships between home, school, and the neighborhood. They believed the family and community should work together to support positive play opportunities. There did not seem to be a pattern connecting their play experiences as children or their beliefs about play with the skills they detected in the video clips.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Three themes emerged from the data regarding play's value, family influence, and environment. In this chapter, each theme will be related to the literature reviewed in chapter two of this study. In addition, the theoretical frameworks were cognitive development and ecological theory. The findings will be placed in the theoretical context for understanding the viewpoints and factors that influence parental beliefs about play's influence on the preschool child's cognitive development. In particular, this study provided a deeper understanding about how low income African American parents of children in Head Start view play's significance in the process of preparing children for kindergarten. Beliefs regarding the value of play among these participants seemed to be overwhelmingly positive.

The first question was, "What are parent beliefs about the value of play and its influence on language development, critical thinking, and social competency?" The subthemes that emerged here demonstrate that participants held overarching beliefs that play impacts a child's language development, socialization, critical thinking, and creativity as they interact with materials and other children. In this study, parents believed children had opportunities to develop their language through various encounters with peers through group play on the playground, neighborhood friends, and school activities. They believed various games such as board games or electronic games required children to interact with siblings, peer, or parents, thus enhancing vocabulary. Parents believed social competency was achieved through sharing, knowing right from wrong, and cooperating with others during play time. In addition, participants believed that play helped to initiate getting along with others, resolving conflicts in a peaceful way, and exercising critical thinking in solving problems. These parent beliefs about the overarching and broad value of play support the contention that income may not be a factor when it comes to promoting children's play activities.

Play's value. The "central" or "core" theme is "play's value." Froebel (1894) noted in the nineteenth century that play creates the foundation of intellectual development. These parents reflected long standing beliefs that play interactions and scaffolding enable children to stretch themselves in valuable areas such as language,

self-control, and social skills. Parents valued play in general as a way of promoting social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. Play was widely endorsed at home and in school as a valuable means of encouraging educational readiness. This sample of parents also viewed more formal learning activities as valuable in terms of transitioning from preschool to kindergarten.

This study suggests that parents of preschool children attending Head Start have an underlying knowledge about the value of play as an important component of their child's early education. Rogoff (1990) pointed out that certain cultural aspects regarding parent-child relationships and play are shaped significantly by the parent's beliefs and interactions with their children. Schwartzman (1978) pointed out that encouragement of certain kinds of play for disadvantaged children potentially is only an attempt to get parents of different cultures or ethnic backgrounds to adopt the play values of the middle class; however, parents in this study seemed to possess innate respect for play and did not indicate being pressured into adopting their view points.

Parent comments suggest beliefs that play enhances a child's ability to be creative, self-disciplined, and language appropriate. Such beliefs are parallel to Creasey, Jarvis, and Berk (1998) who found that children practice cognitive and social skills through sharing, self-discipline, creative thinking, and cooperation by playing. Pretending was considered a critical behavior in the development of mental structures and developing language. These beliefs reflect Piaget and Inhelder (1969) who suggested exploratory play, such as pounding and kneading dough, leads to higher levels of constructive play when the child begins to use objects or materials to create something and engage in games that have rules.

Van Hoom, Nourot, Scales, and Alward (1993) found that children naturally use objects, actions, and language to create imaginary situations, underscoring a link between constructive play and pretend play. Parents similarly commented on the fact their children liked to use different objects to create in a play situation. Research supports the idea that young children can become thoughtful problem solvers if they are encouraged to plan and reflect on their actions. Prekindergarten children need opportunities to make choices (Epstein, 2003), a point echoed by this sample.

Moreover, the parents maintained Rosko's (1988) assertions that children who pretended to read exhibited early literacy activities indicating a relationship between play and literacy. Many of the mothers in this study talked about how their children liked to play school and had a variety of reading materials to promote literacy skills. Although the focus of this study was not on literacy development, the sample seemed to agree that the acquisition of skills related to literacy such as language, reading and writing can be linked to play (Nourot & Van Hoom, 1991).

Family influence. Bronfrenbrenner (1979) and Ogbu (1981) placed emphasis on the importance of the total (e.g. grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) family system's influence in the development of the child's competencies and readiness skills for kindergarten. This study suggests that low income African American parents similarly perceive the importance of fostering an environment that would initiate and support regular parent-child interaction through play, which in turn, can promote language development, critical thinking, problem solving strategies, and readiness for kindergarten. Monitoring television time, incorporating reading, encouraging language development, providing educational games and puzzles, and facilitating exposure to a variety of play activities may enhance achievement and socialization (Hammer & Weiss, 1999).

Although a child's physical health is not a type of play experience, the parents considered it a factor linked to school performance. Health was considered an important component of school readiness, and many described family influence in promoting physical play as valuable. They commented that children who are well nourished, get adequate rest, and have regular health care tend to have better outcomes in terms of their overall ability to concentrate and to perform well in school. In addition, working with their children at home and school was important to participants. They believed that a healthy connection between home, school, and community supports a relationship that makes most play experiences highly beneficial to children.

Parents involved in this study were consistent with the general description of low-income heads of household who are single mothers living at poverty level. They had limited and varied educational levels and employment, and they all met government income qualifications for Head Start. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) pointed out that

poverty appears to be a more significant factor in school achievement for economically disadvantaged children than the educational level of the mother or family structure. These low-income African American parents endorsed a generally positive view of play and an appreciation of its significance for child development. The results of this study revealed that valuing play as a learning opportunity is not necessarily related to income.

Environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that a child's development reflects several environmental influences such as family, school, siblings, peers, and community. Low-income children and their parents could be affected by various factors in the environment which in turn could directly affect play activities. The process of play development may be affected by socioeconomic factors. Children interact with their environment through play; research shows that cognitive development is enhanced by play (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). This study shows that participants believe there is a relationship between the home and school environment. This belief is important in terms of Head Start playing an integral part in providing support to enhance the achievement of their preschool children. Participants seemed to believe the Head Start philosophy strengthened both play and academics promoting readiness for kindergarten.

Patterns of play. Some parents made clear links between their own memories of play and play themes regarding their children. For example, several who enjoyed active play stressed positive release of energy for their children. Some who remembered play in social situations emphasized active learning of social skills such as manners; many also repeated the importance of the family and community in supporting positive play experiences. However, there was not always a clear connection with the sample. More generally, all parents spoke about pleasant play experiences in their own lives and found some value of play in their children's lives. Most importantly, parents wanted their children to have positive play experiences, but these did not have to mirror their past play experiences. They realized that they had power to positively support play, but they looked to their family and school for additional support in term of their children's play opportunities.

Prior empirical research regarding parent beliefs about play seemed to be lacking, especially regarding low-income African American parents. This study suggests

that low-income African American parents believe in the ecological approach that play activities and intellectual development are closely interwoven within the home environment, school, neighborhood, and society.

This Study in Terms of the Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks were useful in understanding the dynamics of play and play outcomes with a focus on an ecological approach in terms of the families' influence on the play activities of the child. Jean Piaget (1962) contributed knowledge about the relationship of play and cognitive development, suggesting children learn through encountering experiences in their environment. Participants in this study endorsed play as a means by which their children can develop communication, memory, cooperation, and self-regulating behaviors. Most of the participants commented on how "Children have to make choices during play and solve problems when they occur." Parents also seemed to reflect the belief that "Play is a very productive way of learning," which supports Piaget concerning the way children exact meaning, interpret, and expand prior knowledge. The researcher gained insight about the participant's self-efficacy beliefs as well. Participant's individual self-beliefs could promote effective opportunities for their children to experience a variety of play activities and possibly generate a positive outcome for school readiness.

Vygotsky (1978) theorized that children operate in a "zone of proximal development," and with the assistance of an adult or older sibling, they are able to complete tasks beyond their developmental levels. All of the parents in this study believed it important for them and other family members to be involved in play experiences to help their children reach their potential level. By monitoring the play activities of their children and scaffolding or providing assistance with activities perhaps above their ability, the parents saw their involvement as important to the zone of proximal development. Exposure to Head Start may also have influenced beliefs that it is important to structure play goals and activities that promote essential skills needed for kindergarten.

Children and their families are influenced by a number of environmental factors which directly affect the belief system and impact the play activities of the child either negatively or positively. One aspect of the context is socialization. Interactions and the

relationship between parent and child have a bi-directional influence and is the strongest influence on the child. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory approach provided an additional framework for viewing the parent and child in context. Having the participants remember their own play behaviors shed light on parent experiences and how their experiences may have shaped the play experiences of their children. For example, Theresa remembered playing outside at her grandmother's house nearly all day with her cousins and brother during the summer, but when school started she was only allowed to play an hour after she finished her homework. She believed play is a time when children can express themselves freely, develop language skills, and practice self-discipline.

Culture is a set of shared and socially transmitted ideas that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture includes a set of beliefs and values regarding social relationships, and shared attitudes nested within a group, creating a motivational force. This is the impetus for individuals to behave and think in certain ways. African American culture is very diverse; however, there is a natural interdependence, collective responsibility, and spirituality (Davis & Rimm, 1997). For that reason, culture is another key influence on beliefs and attitudes regarding play and is very important in understanding the values guiding the beliefs of African American parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Thus, an environmental or ecological approach helped in understanding the dynamics of low-income African American mothers' beliefs about play and its relationship to cognitive development competencies. Historically, studies of achievement and socialization of low-income children were focused on the influence of their families. Limited English proficiency, family income, family structure, and parent's education have been identified as factors affecting the social context. Contrary to the deficits previously mentioned, this study focuses on parental beliefs, and a collaborative relationship between all influential elements in the child's environment. These findings might show that play is an essential component in reversing the negative outcomes facing poor children.

The African culture has a proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." This supports the mesosystem (e.g. connection between teacher, parents, church and community) approach which includes the child's play environment, and nuclear or

extended family. An extension of that family would include the deep connection to the church which helps to influence the growth of the child morally and spiritually (Kambon, 1992). The researcher feels insights gained from this study regarding African American parental beliefs needs further investigation perhaps regarding the different views and goals parents have based on their cultural experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should seek to investigate the mechanisms by which low-income parent beliefs are linked to play outcomes that promote preparation for kindergarten. For example, parent-child play interactions could be observed. One mechanism used in this study was to have parents remember their own play experiences. Perhaps future research could explore relationships between parent experiences, parent beliefs, knowledge about the benefits of play, and parent behaviors more in-depth.

It might be beneficial for future researchers to survey the effects of parent involvement in Head Start on play and educational outcomes. Some parents may have a more proactive approach while others may be less interactive in the play process.

Parents who exhibit high levels of support might be expected to structure the environment at home to be more encouraging for play. However, educational outcomes could still occur from the play activities of children with less interactive parents. Parent-child play observations in the home could have added potential insights regarding the participant's beliefs concerning play. Teachers were not interviewed to gain their insights or beliefs about play, but a future study of teacher beliefs and practices could provide additional evidence for what this study has claimed as themes. This is an area that needs investigating.

Cultural aspects of play beliefs and play behaviors, including race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status, are important according to the ecological theory. African American parents and those of low-income status may have a different way by which they articulate their beliefs about play. Future researchers could compare the beliefs of African American parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds with each other and with other cultural groups. African American mothers might more consciously support and structure the environment at home to be more conducive to play (Petit,

1998). These low-income parents generally provided a variety of educational materials in the home and may have been involved in their children's play activities more consistently due to their beliefs about the value of play. This may shed light on any belief factors that may be present due to economic, educational, and social experiences.

Play beliefs of Head Start teachers and of parents could be correlated. Do the play beliefs of the teachers support or differ from the parents? Few studies have examined teacher's beliefs about the role of play in child development and education; further investigation needs to be conducted to yield important insights regarding the impact of cultural values on teacher's beliefs. Many other early learning programs have emerged over the years, and perhaps it is imperative to compare beliefs of teachers involved in early learning programs based in areas of poverty with beliefs of teachers in middle and high income areas. Developing a better understanding of beliefs about play will be crucial in facilitating communication and collaboration between teachers and parents about early learning environments.

Studies establishing benefits of parent-school teamwork could be especially valuable for families from a background of poverty. The participants in this study may not be representative of all low-income, African American mothers because of their association with Head Start. They quite possibly received exposure to play's value due to their child's participation in an early intervention preschool program.

In addition, more information is needed about Head Start's role and impact on cognitive development and training provided to the parents. Further research should include investigation of the impact of practices, such as monthly parent meetings, and the effectiveness of such practices in enhancing parent-child play interaction and subsequent cognitive development.

A focus group design including male and female caregivers could allow the participants the opportunity to voice various views and examine similarities and differences regarding play's value, cognitive development, and social competency.

Limitations of the Study

Initially interviews were held at the Head Start Program site in a reserved room assuring privacy and confidentiality. Most participants expressed they would feel more

comfortable having the interviews conducted in their home. Consequently, in most cases the home environment presented a variety of limitations, such as lack of complete privacy, recording the interview without distractions, and getting a clear recording void of background noise. Perhaps a larger sample size may have offered additional insights due to not being able to generalize the results. Lastly, data analysis was solely based on the researcher's perspective and other conclusions are possible.

Conclusions

The current study was based on exploration of parental beliefs of African American mothers raising their children in the context of poverty. Examination of the strengths and weakness of parental beliefs and strategies within such a diverse cultural group is limited in literature. Emphasis has primarily been on the deficiencies of ethnic minority parents in comparison to middle class Caucasian parents. However, the African American mothers participating in the current study had a positive view of play and their beliefs were similar to those of middle class status. Miller (1992) suggested that some African American parents resent government sponsored programs that impose middle class methods on them. Such a view was not apparent among the African American mothers in this study. They endorsed play at home and school to encourage school readiness. Parental beliefs about play are an essential prerequisite for the child's exposure to a well thought-out environment that promotes school readiness.

Play is incorporated into the daily activities of preschool children in Head Start. However, play is not an official component of the curriculum. Perhaps the incorporation of play activities that have measurable learning objectives would provide parents with a way of evaluating the outcome of various play activities and the developmental aspects for kindergarten readiness.

Play has been investigated for a number of years; however, further investigation of parental beliefs is warranted to ensure researchers and practitioners gain further knowledge of the belief systems of at-risk populations such as African American parents and children living under the constraints of poverty. McGroder (2000) found mothers who did not graduate from high school and young mothers were no more "at risk" for being less nurturing than older mothers or mothers with a higher educational level.

There is limited research addressing the views and behaviors of culturally specific individuals such as low-income African American parents. Assessment of parent beliefs and efforts to develop interventions specifically targeting low-income African American parents and their preschool children's play activities could improve creativity, language development, problem solving, and readiness for kindergarten by adapting to cultural factors. Clearly, parent beliefs about play among low-income African American families are an important consideration in the conceptualization of pathways involved in children's cognitive development and school readiness.

APPENDIX A
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 . FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 1/30/2008

To: Yvonne Muhammad

Address: 1119 North Webster Avenue Lakeland, FL 33805
Dept.: FAMILY & CHILD SCIENCE

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Parent Beliefs about Play: Relationship with Cognitive Development and
Involvement of Low-Income African American Parents in their Preschool
Children's Play

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 1/26/2009 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be

reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Marsha Rehm, Advisor
HSC No. 2007.928

APPENDIX B
AGENCY PERMISSION FORM

AGENCY PERMISSION FORM

Ms. LaTonnja R. Key, M.A.
Family and Community Partnership Manager
CDI Head Start, Polk County, FL
4110 S. Florida Avenue, Suite 200
Lakeland, FL 33813

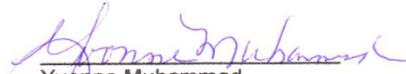
Dear Ms. Key:

I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. I am completing a dissertation entitled "Parent Beliefs about Play: Relationship with Cognitive Development and Involvement of Low-Income African American Parents in their Preschool Children's Play." I am requesting permission to recruit and interview parents who are willing to participate. This study will be conducted at a Head Start Center in Polk County, Central Florida or the participant's home.

This research is directed by Dr. Marsha Rehm, Associate Professor of Family and Consumer Sciences Education, Florida State University. The purpose of this research is to understand parent beliefs about play and the relationship play has with preschool children's cognitive development. Participants will be interviewed at the center or in their home. They will be asked open ended questions that have no right or wrong answer. Participation in this study is voluntary and all answers to questions will be kept confidential to the extent required by law. Names of the participants will not appear on any results. No individual responses will be reported, only group findings will be reported. Participants may withdraw at any time without penalty. The findings from this study might assist low-income parents, caregivers and educators in developing strategies to improve the cognitive experiences of preschool children from limited resource families.

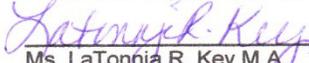
If this research and procedure meet with your approval, please sign this permission form where indicated below. If you have any questions or concerns, please call Dr. Marsha Rehm at (850) 644-7776 or Yvonne Muhammad at (954) 593-3112.

Sincerely,


Yvonne Muhammad
Ph.D. Candidate, Florida State University

March 3, 2008
Date

Permission is granted to recruit and interview participants.


Ms. LaTonnja R. Key M.A.
Family and Community Partnership Manager
CDI Head Start Polk County, FL

March 3, 2008
Date

APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FORM

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT
FORM**

**Hello, my name is Yvonne Muhammad. I am a doctoral candidate in the department of Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University. I am interested in interviewing African American parents of Head Start preschool children to obtain information regarding parent beliefs about play and the relationship with school readiness skills (i.e., language development, numbers, colors, etc.) as well as parent involvement in the play of their preschool children. Would you be willing to participate in an interview and answer a few questions regarding your beliefs about play and your involvement in your child's play? As a thank you each participant will receive a \$20.00 gift card at the end of the interview session.
If yes, please sign this form giving me permission to contact you.**

Participant Signature

(____) _____
Phone Number

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Informed Consent Form-Interview Guide for Parents

I freely and voluntarily, and without element of force or coercion, consent to be a participant in the research project entitled: "Parent Beliefs about Play: Relationship with Cognitive Development and Involvement of Low-Income African American Parents in their Preschool Children's Play."

This research is conducted by Yvonne J. Muhammad, a graduate student in Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University under the direction of Dr. Marsha Rehm. I understand the purpose of this research project is to understand parent beliefs about play and the relationship play has with preschool children's cognitive development. I understand that if I participate in the interview, I will be asked semi-structured open-ended questions regarding my beliefs and insights about play and cognitive development as it pertains to preschool age children.

I understand that I will be asked semi-structured open ended questions that have no right or wrong answer, the researcher is interested in my experiences and the development of meanings regarding play and cognitive development. I understand that the interview will be audio taped to accurately record the information, and that all names and identifying details will be changed during transcription and analysis. The total time commitment would be about 30 minutes. I understand I will be compensated for my participation with a \$ 20.00 appreciation gift certificate. I understand my participation is voluntary and I may stop participation at any time. All my answers to the questions will be kept confidential to the extent required by law. My name will not appear on any results. No individual responses will be reported; only group findings will be reported.

I understand that there are benefits for participating in this research project. My own awareness regarding beliefs about play and play's relationship to cognitive development will be increased. I will be providing valuable insights into the meanings and experiences of parents who regarding play. This knowledge can assist low-income parents, caregivers and educators in developing strategies to improve the cognitive experiences of preschool children from limited resource families.

I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I have been given the right to ask and have answered any questions concerning the study. Questions, if any have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may contact Yvonne J. Muhammad, graduate student in the Department of Family and Child Sciences, Florida State University, (954) 593-3112 or Dr. Rehm, Associate Professor of Family and Consumer Sciences Education at (850) 644-7776 or Office of Research Human Subjects at (850) 644-7900 for answers to questions about this research or my rights. Group results will be sent to me upon my request. I have read and understand this consent form.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX E
FAMILY INFORMATION FORM

**FAMILY INFORMATION FORM
PARENT BELIEFS**

Please mark answers with an X where applicable: Demographics

Name _____ Phone No. () _____

Address _____

Age _____ Gender: Male _____ Female _____

Child's Birthdate _____ Child's Gender _____ Male _____ Female _____

Number of Siblings _____ Age of Siblings _____ Gender: Male _____ Female _____

1. Your relationship with the Head Start child:

_____ Mother _____ Father
_____ Grandmother _____ Grandfather
_____ Aunt _____ Uncle
_____ Other _____

2. What is your marital status?

_____ Single _____ Married
_____ Divorced _____ Separated
_____ Widowed _____ Other _____

3. Family Income: What was the total income of all persons in your household in 2007? _____

_____ \$5,000 or less	_____ \$25,001 to \$30,000
_____ \$5,001 to \$10,000	_____ \$30,001 to \$35,000
_____ \$10,001 to \$15,000	_____ \$35,001 to \$40,000
_____ \$15,001 to \$20,000	_____ \$40,001 to \$50,000
_____ \$20,001 to \$25,000	_____ \$50,001 to \$75,000

4. What is your race?

_____ African American/Black _____ Caucasian/White
_____ Hispanic/Latino _____ Asian American
_____ Biracial: _____

5. What is the highest level of education?

_____ 6th-8th _____ 9th _____ 10th _____ 11th _____ 12th (no diploma)

_____ H.S. Graduate or GED _____ College _____ # of years _____

College Graduate _____ Degree Received _____

APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Parent's Play:

1. Remembering your own play experiences as a child;
What did you love to play?
2. Who did you play with and where did you play?
3. What kind of toys did you use?
4. How long did you play on average per day?

Child's Play

1. Tell me about your child's play;
What does he/she like to play?
2. Who does your child play with and where does your child play?
3. What kind of toys does your child use while playing?

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS

SKILLS:

1. Do you think play helps your child to be creative, increase his/her language abilities and develop self discipline? Explain.
2. Tell me about a time you observed your child playing. What was your child doing? What did you think or do? What did your child gain from playing, if anything?
3. Tell me about the last time you played dress up or some type of pretend play. What other types of play does your child enjoy?
4. What kind of play would you say has helped your child to get ready for kindergarten? Explain.

BELIEFS:

5. Do you think play is an important part of your child's mental and physical development?
6. Do you think your past play experiences influence how you play with your child? Give me an example.
7. Is it important to provide games, puzzles and other play materials in the home? What do you provide for your child in your home?
8. How much time do you spend playing each week with your child? How important is it to have play time with your child?

INVOLVEMENT:

9. Is it important for parents to be involved in their child's play? How much time do you spend playing with your child?
10. Are other family members ever involved in the play activities of your child? Describe a recent situation.

VIDEO CLIPS OF PLAY: Block Builders and Marble Fun

What do you think they are learning?

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