

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER:  
NAVIGATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES DURING  
A TIME OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

By

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Note:

1. The italicized passages throughout this dissertation are my personal voice as the researcher reflecting on my own life experience, memories, or personal reflections. These reflections represent my view of the world through experiences with my culture and society thus revealing my personal bias and stance.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Through remembrance of the past and fantasies of the future, I am suggesting, we educators might write our way out of positions of “gracious submission.”  
~Pinar, 2004, p. 127

In today’s climate of teacher accountability, teacher practices are increasingly prescribed and teachers are challenged by a lack of professional respect for their work to gain confidence that their place is not only meaningful but necessary. About one half of all teachers leave the profession during their first five years on the job, partially due to lack of support of their professional decision-making (Taubman, 2009). With fingers being pointed at teachers for the current educational turmoil in the United States, maybe it is time to heed Pinar’s (2004) advice and look to the past, examine the present, and inspire the future as a way to get out of “gracious submission,” defined as a way teachers have accepted all social and political changes in education without having a voice (p. 127). Many researchers agreed with Pinar that the past and the present inform the future and create a starting point to become more reflective while exploring self and identity (Cary, 2006; Fleener, 2002; Pinar, 2004; van Manen, 1990; Wang, 2004).

### *Researcher Reflection*

*From time to time, self doubt crept into my kindergarten teaching practices. As I continued to teach in this urban setting, the accountability measures were continually increasing, creating much concern for all the teachers on our staff. This always made me question if my teaching practices would work for all the children in the class or if I needed to use more skill and drill in order to ensure that the children would gain the skills needed for tests in first grade. With each passing year this doubt faded, and I felt more and more confident in my teaching as I was able to see how the children benefited and gained deeper understanding.*

With an interest in the essence of early childhood teacher professional identity during these changing times, I believe that focusing on the voice of early childhood teachers may lead to new understanding about what it means to be an early childhood teacher in an age of accountability and increasing mandates. This study took a closer look, with a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, at the professional identities and teaching practices of six early childhood teachers in Midwestern urban and surrounding suburban public school settings. Each participant was interviewed, participated in protocol writing, and was asked to participate in a focus group. The researcher also provided autobiographical reflections all in an effort to add to the conversation about the early childhood teacher in an age of accountability.

### **Research Problem**

Early childhood public school teachers have worked hard to be seen, heard, and respected by their peers and community. Teachers have been continually scrutinized concerning their professional presence in the United States. Documentaries such as “Waiting



for Superman” (2010) expressed the doubt that currently surrounds teachers and their ability to professionally teach and support children in their development. Aldridge, Kilgo, and Emfinger (2010) wrote in, “The Marginalization of Women Educators: A Consequence of No Child Left Behind?” how early childhood teachers are experiencing “silencing and marginalization of women teachers’ voices through the overall de-professionalization of education practitioners” (p. 41). Aldridge, et. al (2010) referred to early childhood teachers working within the confines of the governmental requirements or more rigid curriculum requirements as “handmaidens” (p. 45). Teachers are faced with the curriculum taking dramatic shifts toward a more rigid standardized curriculum and are continually challenged to find time and spaces within the curriculum to be creative and teach to their unique classroom (Sleeter, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2010). With a lack of creativity and decision making in the classroom, teachers are left to be submissive to the call of accountability in our current times. How does losing this power of decision making affect early childhood teachers and their professional identity?

### *Researcher Reflection*

*In my second year of teaching, I switched schools and moved to yet another suburban school setting and found myself again overwhelmed with the new school policies. I worked again with veteran teachers and found that they used many of the same things year after year. They seemed to enjoy sharing new ideas I had learned in college or gained from other teaching experiences. I was learning to be a part of a teaching community and starting to assert myself as the leader of my classroom and all that occurred within it. I had two half-day kindergarten classes and enjoyed all the different learning styles and personalities within the classroom.*

*I met my first serious teaching challenge when I was brought into the school office by the principal to explain my teaching practices. Apparently the janitorial staff had all agreed that my classroom was the messiest classroom in the school. I was told that this was because I had a sensory table that rotated sensory experience items weekly, making huge messes. I had purchased a hand vacuum cleaner and broom with a dust pan to deal with the daily mess prior to being accused of making an undue mess. As a matter of fact, I made my students responsible for cleaning up the mess made after their turn at the sensory table in an effort to turn the classroom over to my students and empower them to take responsibility for their play.*

*I was truly shaken by the experience but found it within myself to stand up for my class and what I felt was appropriate. I shared with my principal multiple research articles on the benefits of sensory experiences for early childhood students and how they enhance the fine and gross motor skills. He was very receptive to my initiative and reassured me that he would support my efforts with the sensory table. This was the first time in my teaching experience that I witnessed first-hand the power of backing your practices within the classroom with research. This was my first taste of creating change within a public school setting by sharing information. This experience projected me into another level of confidence and advocacy for what I believed were best practices for my students. My identity as a teacher changed with this experience. I came to know that I have the ability to stand up for what I believe are the best practices for children in my classroom as well as use research to support my efforts. This made me believe that I was not a victim to the school system but was truly an active, engaged member of the school.*

Early childhood teachers have been working for years to demystify their professional role in the public school system and to be seen as educated professionals. Dillabough (1999) explored how female teachers are in many cases conceptualized as mother in the classroom, which can create hegemonic issues. Many derogatory phrases have been associated with early childhood professionals, such as: babysitter, not capable of teaching other grades, not knowledgeable, and not as professional as other members of the school community. During his presidential term, Ronald Reagan said that grandmothers were best qualified and should volunteer to be early childhood teachers, leaving those who choose to teach early childhood learners to feel that their role was little more than a caregiver. Kremenitzer and Miller (2003) found that “The cycle of a positive and successful education begins with the early childhood teacher, the professional specifically prepared to create the best learning experiences possible for our youngest learners” (p. 12). As research on the importance of rich experiences throughout the early childhood years continues to show that these early years are the most vital determination of a child’s future, it seemed logical that teachers who are the most vital part of this process at school would start to gain a more prominent place in our communities (Kartal, 2007).

Long-term studies, such as the Perry Preschool Study that followed individuals from ages four through 40, shared how significant an early childhood teacher can be in the lives of students, not only for the immediate positive impact but also the life-long positive impact (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005). Within the program group of the Schweinhart study, early childhood teachers created a foundation of learning for these preschool students, who benefited throughout their lives, and had a positive impact not only on their education but also other defining areas such as economic performance, crime

prevention, health, family, and children (Schweinhart, et. al, 2005, p. 2-3). The control group of the Schweinhart study had not received a preschool experience as the other preschool participants, resulting in the control group not reaping the same benefits in their early school years or later in life (Schweinhart, et. al, 2005, p. 1). This supported the notion that the early childhood teacher plays an important role in the lives of children and can impact students not just in the here and now but also in the future. If students are actually learning most of their life skills as well as developing 50% of their brains during the early childhood years, why were early childhood teachers not respected and honored as professionals in the community (Halfon, Shulman, Hochstein, & California University, 2001). With this life-long impact on the lives of children each day, early childhood professionals need to regain their decision-making voice and re-establish their professional position.

In recent years, there has been a shift to an accountability focus within public schools. The shift to which I am referring is from developmentally appropriate practices for the individual child (Kremenitzer & Miller, 2003) to children viewed in masses with achievement as determined by test scores (Taubman, 2009). Teachers who have taught five years or less probably learned in college a different approach to teaching and learning, one that embodied these accountability standards. I argue that this disconnection from child development knowledge which early childhood teachers gain during their education and through teaching has created stress and a change in their professional identity. Such stress has resulted in the teacher leaving teaching for another career, becoming ill, or experiencing increased emotional distress.

Without an embraced professional identity, the professional decision making of the early childhood teacher has been compromised. The lack of professional decision making of

the teacher in a classroom can be not only damaging to the teacher but also all those whom the teacher engages (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Marxen, Ofstedeal, & Danbom, 2008; Russell, 2011; Vartuli & Rohs, 2009). There are three major reasons that early childhood teacher professionalism needs to be explored further. The first reason for this research is that we are at risk of sliding back into our historical view of the early childhood teacher as a submissive member of the school community. If early childhood teachers are perceived as lacking the ability to create, analyze, and act upon professional decision making, then there is a loss of professionalism. The second reason this study is needed is the impact that early childhood teachers have on the lives of their students. Without teacher decision making in schools, the life-long positive impact on the lives of early childhood students will be jeopardized. The third reason for this study is the need for early childhood teachers to regain professional decision making to impact the potential of early childhood students for the future of the community. In an effort for early childhood teachers to regain their voice in the public school community, I believe that the place to start is to focus on the essence of the early childhood teacher and build from their past, present, and future selves in an effort to develop a more complex understanding of the meaning of the early childhood teacher.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the essence of early childhood teacher professional identity and ways it is being expressed in professional decision making and practices. This hermeneutic phenomenological approach exposed a more complex understanding of what it means to be an early childhood teacher in today's world. According to van Manen (1990), "phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the texts of life, and semiotics is used here to

develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics” (p. 4). “Writing with real voice has the power to make you pay attention – the words go deep” (Elbow, 1998, p 299).

### **Research Questions**

We write to expose the unexposed ~ Lamott, 1994, p. 198

The interest in research on the early childhood teacher sparked from the determination to find out more about my passion, which was teaching early childhood students in public education, early childhood teacher professional identity, and how this professional identity informed teaching practice and the learning environment. The main research question that drove the study was: what does it mean to be an early childhood teacher in today’s educational climate? There are a myriad of sub-questions that explore the intricacies of the early childhood teacher’s professional world. The sub-questions on which I focused are as follows:

- \* How do early childhood teachers feel about the current state of their teaching?
- \* What drives the decision-making process of the early childhood teacher in today’s political climate?
- \* How do teachers’ stories reflect the effects of decreased teacher decision making on students?

### **Limitations**

This study involved early childhood teachers with five or more years experience in the early childhood classroom. There are few early childhood teachers who stay in the early childhood community for this length of time. The turn-over rate at the early childhood level is high (Taubman, 2009), as the work is stressful and grueling. This limits the number of

participants from which to choose. Another limitation of the study was the geographic focus. The study was conducted in a small urban and suburban region of the Midwest and might not resemble other communities in other regions.

A final limitation of the study was the lack of participation from second and third grade teachers. By using the snowballing method of participant recruitment and limiting participants to those with an early childhood degree, the diversity of the teacher population was slim. It became apparent after the first few weeks of participant recruitment that the second and third grade teachers who were willing to participate were not eligible due to their elementary degree. Even though this became a limitation of the study, it moved me to start my analysis of the early childhood teacher. Why are there not more second and third grade teachers who hold an early childhood degree? Then this moved me to discover that it was a challenge to find kindergarten and first grade teachers who hold an early childhood degree.

### **Significance of Study**

Although the early childhood teacher has been studied many times in the past (Brown, Castle, Rogers, Feuerhelm, & Chimblo, 2007; Clyde, 1990; Kremenitzer & Miller, 2003; Langford, 2007; Osgood, 2006), the current political and academic climate, which has increasingly diminished teachers' professional decision making, created a need to reopen the conversation (Cuban, 2009). One way to engage in conversation and gain deeper understanding was to look at the narratives of early childhood teachers. Works such as Schwarz and Alberts (1998) expose how vital their experiences can be in building a professional identity and professional community. "In other words, people construct narratives and narratives construct people, and our identities emerge through these processes"

(Watson, 2006, p. 510). As Watson (2006) stated, narrative is story and stories of our lives are created through our life experiences.

### *Researcher Reflection*

*There were many times that early childhood teachers had to defend their practices and scheduling of time throughout the school day. For me the first pressures of accountability involved the cutting back of outside or recess time for our kindergarteners. The principal stated that it was no longer acceptable for the kindergarteners to go outside for three twenty-minute recess periods during the day. Instead he instituted three ten-minute periods. Our class was able to navigate this restriction, but I made sure that if we were outside for more than ten minutes I had an activity to which this time was attached and also had this recorded on my lesson plans. Planning and implementing accountable tasks were attached to all times that were considered free, such as free center time, outside time, bathroom breaks, and transitioning. "Time on task" was the buzz phrase in our school district. For the first time in my teaching career, we were asked to continually defend our teaching in the classroom.*

The population of early childhood teachers needed to become the focus of more research studies to further develop their vital role in the educational world. By allowing teachers to share their stories, this will strengthen the profession and in turn help the children with when teachers are interacting daily. Results of this study may be used by early childhood teacher educators to deepen their understanding of what it means to be an early childhood teacher today, which will inform their teaching preparation. In addition, early childhood teacher educators may find reflective practices a way to develop students with future aspirations of being an early childhood teacher, resulting in strengthening their resolve



and confidence. Results will help those in the field to re-think professionalism in early childhood education.

### **Organization**

The research questions and purpose have already been described in chapter one. Chapter two will look closer at the literature impacting this study. As we begin to dive into the essence of the early childhood teacher's professional identity during times of increased mandates, we first needed to explore the research concerning the history of the early childhood teacher. The historical look at the early childhood teacher explored not only the roles early childhood teachers play but also the education that led to these defined roles. Taking the history of the early childhood teacher into account informed the development of professional identity. As the literature review proceeded through professional identity, a logical progression ended with the current political climate in public schools. This set the stage for the methodology of the study in Chapter Three, the themes that emerged from the data in Chapter Four, and exploring the analysis of the study in Chapter Five.

### **Definition of Terms**

Early Childhood Teacher – a public school teacher of pre-kindergarten through third grade students in a public school setting

Early Childhood Education – Refers to education of children age 0-8 years of age occurring in conjunction with the whole child, including but not limited to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth and development. This education is not limited to the school day or setting, but occurs as the child explores and engages the world around them.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice - As the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) defines it, *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP) is

a framework of principles and guidelines for best practice in the care and education of young children, birth through age 8. It is grounded both in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about education effectiveness. The principles and guidelines outline practice that promotes young children's *optimal* learning and development.

DIBELS – Described by the authors of DIBELS, Dr. Good and Dr. Kaminski (2009). The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills.

Professional Identity – fostering of “self descriptions” within a social, cultural, political, and economic context (Cattley, 2007)

Protocol Writing - As described by van Manen (1990), protocol writing is “the generating of original texts on which the researcher can work.” (p. 63).

Push Down Curriculum - Described as standards, objectives, and rigid boxed sets of lesson plans for the student to meet in a prescribed order which are being moved from a higher grade level down into lower grade levels in school.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### INTRODUCTION

...women who teach must bring to our work, studying the relations in which we came to form, reflecting on those relations and creating new forms in the curriculum that express our appreciation, our critique and transformation of the processes that constituted our subjectivity (our identities) and objectivity (the world we share) ~Grumet, 1988, p. 190

Teaching in the early childhood setting is a unique role in our public school system. The history of early childhood teachers reveals how important their role is in the school and in the lives of children. That history also reveals how complex the past of the early childhood teacher has been in efforts to be seen as “professionals.” This chapter attempted to bring to light some of the highlights of the history of the early childhood teacher as well as the meaning of professional teacher identity, and finally, looked at the current political climate in which early childhood teachers are navigating.

## **The History of the Early Childhood Teacher**

“Early childhood teachers are always remembered, because they inspire childhood imagination that enables children to form memories that last a lifetime”  
~Morgan, 1999, p. 225

The early childhood teacher emerged in the United States as a result of the implementation of teaching philosophies of great scholars such as John Locke, Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Rousseau (Morgan, 1999). With concern about the industrialization of America, scholars such as Robert Owen and Horace Mann worked to implement ways to help our youngest members of society develop outside of the harshness of the changing world during this time (Snyder, 1972). As children were seen more and more as unique individuals and not as miniature adults, early forms of early childhood programs began to emerge. “Rousseau pleaded for a less harsh environment that, in his view, was more natural for childhood and play was seen as a natural phase of human development” (Morgan, 1999, p. 46). Near the middle of the 1800s, under the influence of Friedrich Froebel, the first kindergarten was begun by Elizabeth Peabody in Boston (Snyder, 1972). The first school experiences during this time period have been debated, as Schurz started the first kindergarten but it was taught in German, while Peabody has been identified as the mother of kindergarten in America because her kindergarten was taught in English (Morgan, 1999). The early childhood teacher did not spend time on the logistics of teaching but just dove into the needs of the children within the community (Owen, 1920). In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, early childhood children started to attend school as a result of the Froebelian movement.

Thus begins the role of the early childhood teacher to nurture and support the growth and development of children.

As we move through the early to mid 1900s, the early childhood teacher role was utilized to combat poverty and poor conditions for children (Almay, 1988). During this time of war and industrialization, the early childhood teacher was used to fill in the gaps of care giving. With the development of national organizations and teacher education programs across the nation, early childhood teachers started to develop their place in the teaching community using their knowledge of child development as a guide to teach children and develop appropriate programs based on children's needs academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. In the early 1980s during the Reagan administration, "A Nation At Risk" (1983) was published, projecting a future fear-based need for a competitive increase in numbers-driven documentation. This environment set the stage for the early childhood teacher to be accountable for children to learn using skill and drill methods in the classroom in addition to the more traditional care giving of children. With the more numbers-driven academic shift in the late 1900s came an emphasis on the ability of the early childhood teacher to get children ready for their lives in the academic world and to compete against others around the globe (Taubman, 2009). This shift to a competitive business mindset has continued into our current school situation.

### **Early Childhood Teacher Roles Changing Over Time**

In the early 1900s, American early childhood teachers were a part of nursery schools (Owen, 1920). Nursery schools were seen as a place to help young children but to also help parents. The main focus of the nursery school was the hygiene and health

concerns of children during this time of industrialization in America. Grace Owen (1920) recognized that attending to the health and hygiene of the child should not overshadow supporting the whole child developmentally. Another early American early childhood teacher, Margaret McMillan (1921), focused on the child's hygiene and health but also had a defined way to conduct an appropriate learning environment during this time period. Both of these women recognized that the young child was a unique individual and that it was the early childhood teacher's responsibility to oversee the child's developmental needs while addressing their health and hygiene needs and keeping survival skills as a focus. These nursery school children were immersed in poverty and harsh living conditions.

Harriet Johnson (1936) argued for the importance of teachers within the nursery and the vital role they play in this setting. Johnson (1936) began the groundwork for the role of the early childhood teacher to not only be recognized but to also be held up as an esteemed role. During the mid 1900s in America, the early childhood teacher role shifted according to teachers Katherine Read (1950) and Rhoda Kellogg (1949). Issues such as quality child care and theory and practice came to the forefront. Hygiene and health were still discussed but were decreasing in importance. It seemed at this time that teachers were starting to be valued more for their professional knowledge within the early childhood classroom. With the emergence of Head Start in 1965, there was an acknowledgement that the early childhood teacher could provide meaningful experiences that could help combat poor learning in impoverished situations (Biber, 1988). This way of thinking about the early childhood teacher as more of a professional with a skilled

craft moved us toward a need to train teachers and created a sharing of experiences and knowledge before one could teach.

### **Early Childhood Teacher Education**

In the early 1900s, when there was a need for more teacher education for early childhood teachers, two of the most influential thinkers were Alice Temple and Patty Smith Hill. They worked hard to fulfill the work of John Dewey at the Chicago Free Kindergarten Association and the Louisville Free Kindergarten Association (Snyder, 1972). Temple and Smith Hill are credited with creating a more modern view of early childhood education (Snyder, 1972). Both women worked diligently to create an early childhood education environment for students who wanted hands-on training and learning as they developed their skill set to teach. Smith Hill worked to create a way for teachers to learn to explore with children their ability levels without stifling their creativity (Snyder, 1972).

“It was not until the 1930s that education beyond the equivalent of a high school diploma was required for teaching. Teacher training institutions during that time were referred to as normal schools, and even though such schools provided a pool of well-trained people, the appointment of teachers was so political at the local level that often completely untrained people were assigned to teach the “little one” (Morgan, 1999, p. 56).

With a need for more formalized education came a more professional acknowledgement for the early childhood field. There also was a need for an organized group to help share information and standards with the whole. This came in the form of the Association for Childhood Education (ACEI) and the National Association for

Nursery Education (NANE) which became National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Both of these organizations helped relay information to the early childhood teacher community with the goal of "...curriculum development in early childhood education ...to embody a voice for children...this voice guides the teacher in the introduction of projects and ideas, many of which emerge from the imagination of children" (Morgan, 1999, p. 57). This focus on the individual needs of children is a mission for the national early childhood organizations.

Developmentally appropriate practices are viewed as a way to keep the education of young children focused on the child. Within the last twenty years, early childhood teacher education programs and NAEYC have been focused on teaching early childhood teachers how to create and implement a developmentally appropriate classroom with the goal to create early childhood students who are able to critically think as they move forward in education. The use of play as the "foundation" of learning in school has been the overarching theme of the early childhood community in past years with the focus on the individual child (Saracho, 2012). This leads us to our current state in education.

A shift has occurred over the past ten years from developmentally appropriate practices to a more standardized, test-driven curriculum. The early childhood teacher's ability to create curriculum within the classroom has been stifled and replaced with, in many cases, skill-and-drill curriculum. The current climate in early childhood education is for teachers to make sure students hit a specific number on tests and assessments to demonstrate their abilities to move on to the upper elementary grades (Taubman, 2009). This study specifically explored what effect these mandates have on early childhood



teacher professional identities, which in turn affect the early childhood teachers' ability to make decisions in the classroom.

### **Teacher Professional Identity**

“...teaching at its best can be an act of hope and love, compassion and caring, joy and transformation” (Stremmel, 2005, p. 375)

Embracing Stremmel's (2005) words that teaching does not provide an early childhood teacher with a formula to create these momentous acts of hope, love, compassion, caring, joy, and transformation, it would seem that the development of teacher professional identity would be elusive. The mystery of teacher professional identity has been tackled by researchers many times before (Alsup, 2006; Ayers, 2005; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Cattley, 2007; Collay, 2006; MacLure, 1993; Sachs, 2001), but remained a valid and interesting topic of complicated conversation in the academic world. One of the main reasons this topic continued and will continue to be a valid and important topic for educators is “identity is not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life” (Beijaard, et. al, 2004, p. 107). With this complex view of identity formation in mind, I explored in this section of the literature review the definition of teacher professional identity, socio-cultural identity formation, and the role of the early childhood teacher.

#### **What is teacher professional identity?**

How we view teachers' professional identity moves or shifts as the years pass. Historically, professional identity formation was seen as “a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession.” (Sachs, 2001, p. 4) These attributes were fixed and stable within the world of the teacher, not taking into consideration the historical or

contextual place of the individual in the world. Sachs (2001) went on to challenge viewing professional identity as a fixed object in the world and pointed out how teacher identity needs to be seen as “multiple professional identities” (p. 5). Hammersley-Fletcher and Qaulter (2010) stated how teacher identities are crucial to understand as the self confidence related to professional identity will help promote change and growth in schools.

Burn (2007) found that professional identity should be explored not only as a form of existing knowledge but also as a flexible learning opportunity that changes as the teacher takes on the role of learner versus the expert. But Kostogriz and Peeler (2007) warned that teacher professionalism cannot be coerced but should be inspired. Kostogriz and Peeler (2007) also stated their position on teacher identity as:

...the process of becoming rather than being, reflecting a shift from the view of professional identities, however heterogeneous, as temporally and spatially frozen and to the view of their formation and transformation or to what one is doing and who one becomes in the interaction between the tradition of local workplace and the flows of meanings, values, discourses, and cultural artifacts through it (p. 109).

So with the shift from viewing professional teacher identity as fixed to a more fluid, (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2006; Gee, 2001) ongoing process of integration of our multiple identity formations (Beijaard et. al., 2004), there becomes a need to look at the life narrative of teachers (Goodson, 1992). This study did just that and focused on a complex understanding of professional identity formation, keeping in

mind that identities are “multi-faceted” (Alsup; 2006), that was “socially and culturally” (Swennen, Volman, & van Essen, 2008) constructed by lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) throughout teachers’ lives.

### **Role of Early Childhood Teacher**

Kremenitzer and Miller (2003) asked, “what does the early childhood teacher look like?” (p. 7). By looking at the role of the early childhood teacher, one can see a glimmer of the power issues involved within an early childhood professional identity.

Kremenitzer and Miller (2003) went on to state that the early childhood teacher looks like

a super-person who is ‘fluent’ in abilities theories, especially skilled in early literacy, knowledgeable about assessment, a keen observer of and diagnostician regarding individual learning styles, a practitioner who can optimally implement the individual ‘IEPs’ of all the children in the class, and a conductor who can do this simultaneously without missing a beat (p. 7).

Needless to say, the role of the early childhood teacher has been mysterious in the eyes of other professionals in the teaching field. Although it still remains that “all eyes are on the early childhood years...taxpayers, school boards, superintendents, parents, government officials, and benefactors all desire to see solid beginnings for children in the early childhood years” (Kremenitzer & Miller, 2003, p. 12). Clyde (1990) found that early childhood teachers are seen as the “mothering” role in education due to the philanthropic beginnings in nursery schools. Whitehead (2008) stated that early childhood teachers are in the business of not only supporting children but also protecting children, so one could view early childhood teachers as advocates for children. As the

advocate for children, the early childhood teacher during this time of accountability will be in a position to continually evaluate the needs of the children in the class and be a voice within the school and community. Many researchers (Aldridge, et. al, 2010; DiGiovanni & Liston, 2005; Dillabough, 1999) have associated a power relationship between the marginalization of the early childhood role within the teaching profession. With an historic fight for early childhood teachers to not be seen as just caregivers for children or people who play with the children to support their growth, the urgency to not allow our professionalism to slide back into the caregiver or mother roles of early childhood education is vital. Early childhood teachers have worked hard over the past 100 years to be seen as educated individuals who bring a wealth of knowledge to the learning experiences seen by some as just play. Saracho (2012), in her book, *An Integrated Play-based Curriculum for Young Children*, makes the case for play to remain a cornerstone in the early childhood classroom as a vital tool for learning. In order to prevent marginalization of the early childhood teacher, professional views and stances on teacher practices need to be voiced.

### **Current Political Public School Climate**

“In our quest for security, we have lost our freedom” (Fleener, 2002, p. 24)

Since our nation embraced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, there has been continual tightening of mandates, standards, assessments, accountability measures, and time-on-task within early childhood classrooms (Fleener, 2002; Sleeter, 2005; Taubman, 2009). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) explored how NCLB has created an “unprecedented entry by the federal government into matters of education

previously left to the states and school districts” (p. 669). The impact of the change in school districts across America is still a timely conversation in education as we reach the ten-year mark of NCLB. The implications that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) point out are how we envision the “image of knowledge,” “image of teachers and teaching,” and “image of teacher learning” (p. 670). The focus of the political climate of NCLB for this study was how teachers make decisions in the classroom within the clutch of the parameters of the school. Brown (2009) stated “... this influx of reforms by policy makers typically frames the regulation of early education and care through the lens of student performance” (p. 3). This leads to ethical problems within the classroom. Sleeter (2005) noted that “teachers face a dilemma when they try to teach in culturally responsive ways as well as help students to acquire knowledge and skills needed to perform successfully on state and national standardized tests” (p. x). This dilemma leads one to focus back on the teacher and how the teacher is dealing with all of the mandated accountability measures.

## **Curriculum**

Defining curriculum was a place to start in this conversation about the political climate. From the standpoint of the current politic movement, the curriculum is a prescribed set of skills and assessments that lead children from one school year to the next school year. I argue that like Pinar (2004), the curriculum is a “complicated conversation” and like Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck, and Taylor (2003), curriculum goes well beyond content and takes place not only within the classroom but also outside of the walls of the classroom. This form of curriculum challenges teachers to be seen as the implementers of a prescribed curriculum (Paris, 1993). The curriculum is

learning taking place within the child's life as a result of engagement with the world around them. The teacher plays a significant role in becoming an educated experience enhancer at school. Critical thinking skills are crucial to this view of curriculum and the questions that the children engage in throughout their learning experiences. The teacher helps provide a space for students that will allow them to question, critically think, experiment, and engage in learning. This is not what is currently taking place in our schools.

“Ethically, teachers need to decide what is in the best interests of the students they teach, the students’ communities and the larger society” (Sleeter, p. 182, 2005). This statement was made at a time when schools were placing more and more mandated curriculum restrictions on teachers in an effort to keep school test scores high and avoid being placed on national needs improvement lists such as called for in No Child Left Behind. Teachers in early childhood education have historically looked at the needs of the child as a basis for the development of curriculum. At the state and national levels, the focus on academic performance has created a shift from individual needs of the child to a more regulated baseline need of children in a specific grade. First grade students are expected to have a foundation of learning, and then the curriculum builds on this foundation. This was also the case for each grade to follow. This form of curriculum has been developed from business models which create a layered or pyramid effect to learning. Each skill set was developed and then added upon with testing as a means to measure the achievement. There was little room for individual interest and learning style or pace. The pace was set by the state and national standards not to leave any children behind. On paper these ideas appear to be a way to help every child succeed and learn.

In reality, children have human experiences that cannot be predetermined to be performed at a specific pace. This was one of the damaging effects of state and national pressures to increase academics and advance to higher achievement levels. For the purposes of this research, the main three factors of the learning experience at school were the teacher, which has been discussed, curriculum, and developmentally appropriate practices. The next section will explore developmentally appropriate practices in the early childhood classroom.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Cynthia Paris (1993) brought to light that the teacher has been viewed as an incompetent member of the teaching and learning experience in the current political climate. This leads administrators and policy makers to take away the teacher's power to create curriculum and instead replace this action with sanctioned standardized content (Paris, 1993). This was a shift from the early childhood teacher using teacher-created assessment tools to define the needs of the children within his/her classroom, then meeting the children where they are to support their growth and development.

But, as Hopkins (2010) reminded us, "the search for meaning is at the very heart of motivation" for students (p. 29). This is in direct conflict with the current ways curriculum in classrooms is being viewed. "The pressure of deadlines, time lines, and struggling learners not able to cope with the curriculum and assessment demands can keep a teacher from truly teaching." (Hopkins, p. 34, 2010).

Other researchers such as Cary (2006) and Sleeter (2005) called for the production of knowledge to be seen in a new, more complex way, including cultural context and multifaceted multicultural discourses. Souto-Manning (2010) called for

teachers to return to the views of Dewey: “education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself” (p. 29). This view of curriculum is a far cry from our current curriculum mandated by school districts. And as Jill Martin (2010) states in her dissertation research,

We need teachers ...who resist the rigid educational mandates of the No Child Left Behind era by utilizing the same for the sake of the children rhetoric of these reforms and who then do—without question—what their own voice of the child advocate and their own voice of experience believe is best for students (p. 244).



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### OVERVIEW

Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning ~ Maya Angelou

This qualitative research study was conducted from an interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998) utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology to focus the search for the essence of the early childhood teacher in the current historic, social, and political time. As part of the study, I used the following qualitative research methods: individual interviews with each participant, protocol writing (van Manen, 1990), a focus group, researcher autobiographical writing, and member checks. This data collection was all in an effort to answer the main question of the study: what does it mean to be an early childhood teacher in today's educational climate? There were also three sub-questions in my research:

- \* How do early childhood teachers feel about the current state of their teaching?
- \* What drives the decision-making process of the early childhood teacher in today's political climate?
- \* How do teachers' stories reflect the effects of decreased teacher decision making on students?

Within this chapter, I explain the research design, give more information about hermeneutic phenomenology, describe the research setting and participants, explore ethical considerations, and conclude with a description of the data analysis methods applied to this study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research as described by Bloom and Volpe (2008) is suited to exploration, discovery, and description as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. This study is qualitative in nature because it "...is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 5). Qualitative research allowed me to give thick, rich descriptions of the individual life experiences of experienced early childhood teachers from urban and suburban Midwest public schools.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

I chose to approach this interpretivist study from a hermeneutic phenomenology framework. In a phenomenological study, "experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 7). The phenomenon, in the case of this study, was the professional identity of the early childhood teacher.

As Weber (1962) suggested, interpretivism was concerned with explanatory understanding. MacDonald (1982) described bringing each person's biography and inner voice into reflection as a way to reinterpret an experience in order to provide greater grounding for understanding. This study proposed a need to return to the early childhood teacher as a focus of inquiry. The form of inquiry that best fits the study is

phenomenology. According to deMarrais (2004), phenomenology is a way to examine human experiences as a form of inquiry which attempts to discover meaning.

Phenomenology research focuses on the “lived experience” (van Manen, 1990) of not only the research participants but also the researcher (Merriam & Associates, 2002). “It will be ... reinterpretation-as new meaning, or fuller meaning, or renewed meaning – it is precisely what we as phenomenologists are after” (Crotty, 1998, p. 82). With inquiry comes a need to interpret meaning gathered during the inquiry process. “Interpretation operates in the liminal space between the hidden and open, the concealed and the revealed” (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 8).

This study falls within the views of van Manen’s (1990) researching lived experience. van Manen (1990) built upon Heidegger’s (1993) view that “being is the most common and at the same time unique” (p. 43). Attempting to keep true to the heart of van Manen’s (1990) theory of phenomenology, this study attempts to “...accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p. 18). And all the while acknowledging that “from a phenomenological point of view, we are less interested in the factual status of particular instances: whether something actually happened, how often it tends to happen, or how the occurrence of an experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions or events” (p. 10). I believe as van Manen (1990) does that “human life needs knowledge, reflection, and thought to make itself knowable to itself, including its complex and ultimately mysterious nature” (p. 17). The definitions of early childhood teacher and the

professionalism of the early childhood teacher would be seen as common within the teaching world, but at the same time this is a unique viewpoint that needs to be revisited.

### **Hermeneutical Phenomenological Researcher Stance**

As the researcher, my own life stories were explored and interpreted in order to bring to light my personal “bias, understandings, beliefs, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (van Manen, 1990, p. 47). As Keightley (2010) stated, “Situating the researcher clearly in terms of their own social and cultural position, and in relation to the participants, is crucial in evaluating how knowledge has been generated in their interaction” (p. 66). As van Manen (1990) stated, “a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also “lived” by the researcher” (p. 44). In my efforts to live the research question, I tried to hold true to van Manen’s view of hermeneutical phenomenological research and acknowledge my stance in the world as I attempted to hold at bay or expose the shallow or concealing understandings (van Manen, 1990). This is the only way that “bracketing” (van Manen, 1990) was used in this study. The inclusion of my life stories allowed me to bring to light my experiences in an effort to continually acknowledge and push away my views as I “borrow other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62).

### **Socio-Cultural Identity Formation**

Assaf (2008) stated that “sociocultural theories of identity define professional identity as a unique blend of personal beliefs, dispositions, practical knowledge, and educational theories of teaching mediated by an on-going process of interpretation and re-

interpretation of experiences” (p. 240). The view of identity as a socially and culturally influenced construction embraces the fact that teachers are a part of a world larger than their school. Holland et. al (1998) described this as identity not taking place in isolation but taking place in several separate “figured worlds.” These “figured worlds” would include family, friends, and workplace (Holland et. al, 1998). This view of identity embraced the multifaceted view that identity is a process and is not a fixed object. Swennen, et. al (2008) elaborated on the theory of “figured worlds” (Holland, et. al, 1998) and stated that “the figured worlds in which teachers live, (for example, education, schools, and classrooms) are socially constructed worlds that are influenced by history” (p. 172). Swennen et. al (2008) found in their study that teachers professional identity began in their personal history as a student and child.

### **Memories and Inquiry**

Kamler (1996) stated in her study on autobiography that research itself is a story, and this story could be told in many different ways and from many different perspectives. Just as research could be seen in many different ways, memories and life stories can be seen in many different ways. Latta and Kim (2010) shared, “educators’ past sense making figures into present teaching and learning situations with potential for future study” (p. 143).

The reflective practice of retrieving memories has been determined to be a very useful tool for teachers (Hsiu-ting, 2008; Latta & Kim, 2010; Lindsey, Kell, Ouellette, & Westall, 2010). As with Rubin’s (1996) research, the reflection of memories for this study was not concerned with whether the memories were “...accurate or inaccurate, but that they are not encoded, stored, and retrieved as wholes but rather are created at

retrieval using components like the narrative, imagery, emotion division...” (Rubin, 1996, p. 4). This allowed the participants to live in the moment of the memory and express their reflections as if they were in the moment again. Watson (2006) stated how “telling stories not only involved the participant reflecting on and arranging the events from memory but also led to expressing to the listener the importance or significance of the stories. Telling stories was then, in an important sense, ‘doing’ identity work (p. 525).”

Lapadat, Black, Clar, Gremm, Karanja, Mieke, and Quinlan (2010) stated that, “the telling of one’s story was both a construction of self and a performance of self, in which the listener/reader/viewer was implicated as witness, audience, collaborator, and co-constructor” (p. 78). I argue that Watson’s (2006) position on story-telling and Lapadat et. al’s (2010) explanation of construction of self in the story both informed this study by stretching these definitions to include memory work as a form of reflective inquiry into the past stories and the construction of professional identity.

### **Research Setting**

This qualitative research was conducted in a Midwestern urban setting and the surrounding suburban communities. The participant interviews took place in community locations chosen by the participant. The participants of the study chose a place that was comfortable for them. Such places as coffee shops, libraries, a local university campus, and restaurants were utilized as interview venues. The protocol writing experiences were conducted on each participant’s own time and place that they found most appropriate. The focus group was conducted in a quiet closed door study space in a local library, which was centrally located for the participants to meet. The main requirement of the

focus group was that there was enough room to have a circular shape, so the participants could hear and see each other as the questions were explored. The participants' discussion was recorded on a digital recorder.

### **Selection of Participants**

As a part of this study, I interviewed six early childhood teachers who had five-plus years experience working with young children. By focusing on six early childhood teachers, the voice of each teacher was heard in the research. Early childhood teachers brought to the study their experiences of being a student, teaching children, working with parents, and working within a public school. I selected participants who have taught in public school grades pre-kindergarten through third for at least five years because there is a greater possibility that their professionalism is more established. (Burn, 2007; Cattley, 2007; Collay, 2006; Langford, 2007). The participants were considered by colleagues to be experts in their teaching assignments with the ability not only to reflect on their teaching and decision making but also recall their time as a student in college. The participants also had to be willing and able to write in detail for the protocol writing samples. Each participant was asked to answer a few questions about their teaching experience and formal education and then be willing to participate in the study. From there I narrowed my selection based on the ability of the participant to fulfill the requirements of the study.

### **Snowball Recruitment**

As an active member of the early childhood community in the Midwest for the past 14 years, I made many contacts to locate six participants for the study. I started with recommendations of participants by colleagues, who would be considered experts in the

field, and with whom I have worked in the early childhood community over the years. This led to a progression of recommendations and passing along of my recruitment letter by both word of mouth and e-mail. This form of participant recruitment, snowballing, can be described as obtaining participants through a network of social recommendations which start from one initial contact (Warren & Karner, 2010). This form of participant recruitment produces participants that have the least amount of personal connection or relationship to the researcher. The potential participants were contacted via e-mail and asked about their teaching experience and sent the recruitment letter for them to review. From this e-mail exchange, a phone conversation was set-up to answer any questions and set up the first interview. From this series of events, I was able to find six highly qualified teachers who have five-plus years working in the pre-kindergarten through third grade setting as defined by the profession (NAEYC, 2009).

### **Participants of the Study**

The participants of this study are identified with a pseudonym. The participants were given an opportunity to pick a pseudonym, but all six participants deferred. I chose a pseudonym at random. All the participants were female. This was not a prerequisite of the study, but these were the early childhood teachers who were willing to share their life stories. And in reality, the field of early childhood education is dominated by females (Aldridge, et. al., 2010). In order to help the reader gain more insight into the lives of these six participants, I have included a short introduction below.

#### *Autumn*

Autumn is a pre-kindergarten teacher who has taught for eight years. She has experience in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Her teaching experiences have taken



her from rural to suburban to urban settings. Currently she teaches full-day pre-kindergarten in a suburban setting with a teaching assistant. She characterized her current setting as semi-affluent.

*Candace*

Candace is teaching pre-kindergarten. Her teaching experience encompasses public school pre-kindergarten through first grade. Candace also has had experience working in a private preschool setting. Candace has taught for 12 years. Candace is teaching pre-kindergarten in a suburban affluent area. She teaches two half-day pre-kindergarten classes, has a teaching assistant, and has a special needs paraprofessional who assists with the special needs children in her classroom. Each of her classes has up to 20 students.

*Jaime*

Jaime has taught early childhood children for the past 12 years. Her teaching experience is primarily in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Jaime started working as a full-day pre-kindergarten teacher with a teaching assistant and then before the end of the study Jaime left the field of teaching. Jaime had started the school year as the team leader for her team of teachers but had given up this job before the study began. Jaime worked in a high poverty, mainly minority elementary school. Jaime is working on an advanced degree in early childhood education and has experience teaching adults at a local higher education setting.

*Kate*

Kate has taught early childhood children for the past 11 years. She is currently working at a low-income at-risk school. Kate teaches full-day kindergarten but has

worked with first and third graders throughout her career. She is the team leader for the early childhood colleagues with whom she works. Her classroom has around 20 students.

*Katrina*

Katrina is an early childhood teacher who is currently working as a kindergarten teacher. She has experience teaching deaf education for early childhood students.

Katrina has 12 years teaching experience. Her kindergarten class is full day with up to 20 students.

*Paige*

Paige is an early childhood teacher who is currently teaching pre-kindergarten with a teaching assistant. She has 13 years teaching experience. Paige works in an affluent elementary school. Paige described her teaching setting as traditional. Paige is the only pre-kindergarten teacher in her school. Paige has an advanced degree in early childhood education. Paige is the teacher of the year for her school.

**Data Collection**

In order to create a thorough phenomenological study, I utilized four different data collection methods: two individual interviews per participant, protocol writing, focus group, and the researcher's autobiographical life stories. In qualitative research, one way to support the trustworthiness and credibility of the study is by providing triangulation after an informed consent form was agreed to and signed. Then the data collection began. The first part of the data collection was the semi-structured individual interview.

As the researcher, I brought to the study 14 years experience working in early childhood settings. My experiences guided the semi-structured questions asked in the interviews, protocol writing prompts, and focus group. The strength that I brought to the

study was also my bias for the study. I worked to expand upon knowledge and not make assumptions about common early childhood knowledge in order to create the most comprehensive rigorous study possible.

Data were collected over a three-month period from January 2012 through March 2012. Although I was willing to stretch the data collection over a longer period of time, the participants of the study foresaw work obligations becoming more intense after spring break during the collection period. So I accommodated the teaching situations of the participants and compressed the data collection period to meet their needs. The three-month period allowed ample time for the researcher to meet with each individual participant for two different interviews. The focus group was conducted after all the individual interviews toward the end of the data collection.

### **Interviews**

The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the six participants at the beginning of the data collection process (Appendix A). Each interview lasted around one hour and was recorded on a digital recorder and later self-transcribed. I conducted the interviews in a casual place of the participant's choice, such as a coffee shop, library, or local restaurant. The first interview was focused on learning more about the teacher education training that the teacher had, as well as the beginning teaching experiences that started their journey as a teacher. The second individual interview focused on current experiences and practices within the classroom.

### **Protocol Writing**

Protocol writing was described by van Manen (1990) as lived experience descriptions. This way of collecting the reflection of the participant gives the researcher

a first-hand account of the life experience of the teacher. Making a conscious effort to gain close access to the life of the early childhood teacher, this process of protocol writing was utilized. Two protocol writing samples took place throughout the data collection (Appendix B).

At the end of each individual interview, the participant was given a protocol writing prompt in a paper format. The participants also received a digital copy of the writing prompt to the e-mail address of their choice. Each protocol writing sample was returned within a few weeks from the time it was given to the participant. The first protocol writing prompt was focused on a time when the early childhood teacher found herself having to defend or protect what they knew was best for young children. The second protocol writing experience explored the participant's vision for the perfect day as an early childhood teacher without behavioral disruptions or any requirements or mandates placed upon them.

### **Autobiographical Writing Samples**

This qualitative study is just one interpretation of the phenomenon of the early childhood teacher. There was a need to flush out or expose the researcher's lived experiences which would appear as bias in this study. Throughout the study, there are italicized passages which expose or reveal the thoughts and life experiences of the researcher. The researcher answered the questions posed to the participants as a way to uncover the researcher's viewpoint. This was not to fully bracket the bias as according to van Manen (1990):

It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not

in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even turn this knowledge against itself... (p. 47)

As I continued to write my responses to questions posed, my life experiences as an early childhood teacher were reflected in my autobiographical writing samples. deMarrais (2004) described the process of the researcher answering the same questions posed as a bracketing interview. With this study, I allowed myself as the researcher to document my thoughts about the early childhood teacher to reveal my stance as the researcher. Although during the focus group, I remained as quiet as possible to allow participants time to express their responses and flow with conversation.

### **Focus Group**

After two individual interviews had been completed with each participant, I conducted a one-hour focus group (Appendix C). As Kleiber (2004) stated, focus groups operate on the assumption that the group is greater than the parts. The focus group explored ideas found common from the interviews as well as ideas that held importance for the teacher. My role in the focus group was to facilitate the semi-structured questions, as seen in appendix C, allowing each participant to be heard and have time to tell their viewpoints. The only rules for the focus group were that the questions guided the conversation, only one person spoke at a time, and each participant had a chance to answer each question posed by the researcher. The intention was for the focus group to be composed of participants of the study. After finding a common time for five of the six participants, we set up a time to meet. At the last moment one participant was not able to meet. Therefore, the focus group occurred with four of the six participants. This size focus group worked well for the purposes of this study. Lasting one hour the focus group

occurred after two individual interviews and after the completion of the first protocol writing sample.

Although I was concerned that there would not be enough rich conversation for a focus group with only four participants, this was not the case. During this same timeline, I was participating in writing my life experiences along with the participants of the study. After all the information from the interviews and focus groups had been transcribed and placed into a word format, I asked the participants to conduct member checks of their parts of the transcriptions. Then it was time to shift the concentration of the study to data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research employs data analysis as a way to make meaning of the data collection (van Manen, 1990, Warren & Karner, 2010). Within this phenomenology study, themes were viewed as the structures of experience, metaphorically described as knots in our webs of experience (van Manen, 1990). The analysis of this study, or looking for knots from the text, began after the first piece of data was collected. As I listened to the voices of the early childhood teachers on the digital recorder, I transcribed the interview or focus group into a word document. After the interviews, protocol writing, focus group data, autobiographical stories, and member checks were self-transcribed into word documents. Then I printed out hard copies of all the information to begin employing the phenomenological thematic analysis as described by van Manen (1990) as selective highlighting.

## **Selective Highlighting**

Thematic analysis using selective highlighting was described by van Manen (1990) as looking for sentences or groups of sentences that stand out and then asking ourselves what it means or what is happening. The selective highlighting (van Manen, 1990) process was used as a way to move through the text and find the knots of meaning. In the end, selective highlighting uncovered a total of 44 themes (Appendix D). These themes emerged after repeating the selective highlighting process three times with clean copies of the data in an effort to be thorough. After looking at the 44 themes, a process of analyzing each theme began to try to gain access to the meaning expressed by the participants. This process involved merging themes for a more focused view of the revealed themes. In the end there were four main themes with subthemes. Although I acknowledged that there was risk of oversimplifying the data and that the phenomenon of early childhood teacher would not be reached in its entirety with this research, I believed that any work to expose the unexposed was still vital to the field of early childhood education. So with this in mind, I read and reread the data, including the protocol writing, member checks, and autobiographical writings. I highlighted words and phrases that teachers used to describe, explain, or elaborate the early childhood teacher.

Once all the data had been read four times, then I pulled back and started to work with the 44 themes to analysis. At this time, some themes merged into other themes, and others were discarded all together. I created seven themes and began to explore and engage the themes with research literature. After returning to the text, in the end I made a final decision that there were actually four main themes encompassing the elements of

the early childhood teacher from this study. These four themes were then used to organize and conceptualize Chapter Four of this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

With any qualitative research, there is a concern for ethical treatment of the participants and the study in general. Following the guidelines of the IRB and the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR), the first step of the research process was gaining permission through Oklahoma State University IRB board (Appendix E). Included in the permission for the study are the informed consent forms for participants. The participants were always at the forefront of my ethical concerns as I continually reflected on “do no harm” (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004) and the five guiding ethical principles as described by Castle (2012) in her book *Early Childhood Teacher Research*. There are five guiding ethical principles this study followed when engaging participants:

- 1 – all aspects of the research must be explained to participants
- 2 – consent of participants must be obtained before research begins
- 3 – participation is completely voluntary
- 4 – all data gathered must be confidential
- 5 – all risks and benefits must be explained to participants

Another concern of the study was the confidentiality of the students, schools, and teachers mentioned during the interviews and protocol writing sessions. I protected the identity of the participants by using a pseudonym. I also changed the names of others mentioned in the study, including schools, cities, and states in an effort to honor confidentiality.



The researcher bias was an ethical concern that I chose to keep identifying through autobiographical writings laced throughout the study. These writings helped me acknowledge my stance on the research at hand and support my efforts to keep the study not only ethical but trustworthy.

### **Trustworthiness**

Ethical qualitative researchers are concerned with how to make a study trustworthy. Trustworthiness was defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These four facets of trustworthiness were used in this study as a way to reinforce a rigorous ethical study. Credibility was supported by the research being triangulated, member checked, conducted through semi-structured interview questions, and utilizing the participant-researcher.

Transferability of this study was represented through detailed descriptions of the research and the ability of others to see a similar relationship to their worlds through the data. Dependability and confirmability were met in the study by providing rich description of the data collection methods and the analysis of data. This was noted as being an “audit trail” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) for others to see how the data was engaged throughout the study.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the study and methods used to expose the essence of the early childhood teacher. This study was conducted in an effort to learn more about the phenomenon of navigating professional identity during times of increased accountability for teachers within an urban or suburban community in the Midwest. Through a

hermeneutical phenomenological framework, the study explored the essence of the early childhood teacher as expressed through individual interviews, protocol writings, a focus group, and the researcher's life stories. Chapter IV explored the data collected as it has been placed into emerging themes and analyzed in an effort to get closer to the essence of the early childhood teacher in this current time.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER “TEACH ON!”

The act of teaching creates possibility ~ Stremmel, 2005, p. 381.

#### *Researcher Reflection*

*When I began thinking about the true question of what it is like to be an early childhood teacher in today's teaching climate, I immediately was drawn to the idea of interviewing and seeking out information from first, second, and third grade teachers. Therefore, they were the early childhood teachers whose professional freedom was most restricted. They were the ones who had to navigate how to be an early childhood teacher. Then after recruiting participants, I found that all my highly qualified teachers had a variety of teaching experience but were currently pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers. This was troubling for me. I worried that I would not get the same information as pre-kindergarten and kindergarten might not have been affected as harshly as the older grades when it comes to mandates and testing. I worried that the teachers would not feel like they were required to teach a specific curriculum. These worries evaporated after the first interview. This first interview allowed me to see that pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are dealing with just as many mandates as other teachers throughout school districts.*

*I was relieved that I was able to stay the course of the research and continue to look for the essence of the early childhood teacher.*

## **Introduction**

After listening to the data and working with the different themes that arose from the data, I found there were four common themes that all six of my participants discussed throughout the interviews, protocol writing, and focus group. In looking beyond the common themes, I found many other subthemes common to most of my participants. I made connections between themes and subthemes and then used the early childhood participant words to title each theme. This helped to support the connections that I created between the words of the early childhood teachers and the core themes they projected. These themes were related to what the early childhood teacher believed to be true outside of all the demands and pressures of being a teacher. The themes are teachable moments, advocacy, relationships, and stress and struggles. All four themes illuminate what the teachers hold closest to their hearts concerning their professional identity.

### **Theme I: Teachable Moments: “When that Bird Flies In”**

Children are the center of the early childhood world. This was expressed through the stories the participants told and through their expressions of the importance of their jobs as teachers. The children were the focus of the conversation and life experience stories. This was the major weight of the data collection and therefore was the foundation for the first theme from the study. Teachable moments were expressed throughout the data with a focus on not the times outlined in the lesson plan but more the

times that the children took the lead and drove the discovery process and learning in the classroom. Autumn gave a glimpse into her beliefs about her role as a teacher:

I am more of a facilitator because sometimes learning pops up unexpectedly. I want to be there to facilitate that. That is also where the flexibility comes in. Because it may not be exactly what you have planned but if it is what they have planned that is okay to stray from the plan...

These teachable moments were described throughout the data collection as times that the teacher felt needed to be embraced, and that in some situations the demands of the curriculum were snuffing out the teachable moments. Katrina expressed her views on teachable moments as, "...something happens outside or something happened and the kids are interested in that and you kind of go with the moment..." The value of teachable moments seemed to be a very important aspect of the early childhood teacher. Paige described how a teachable moment came about in her pre-k class and then led to a project of study:

This little guy that's sitting there listening and trying to get everybody quiet because there was music in the background and he could hear it. And he is saying what is that and somebody says it is an electric guitar and he said no.

This spark of interest in the sounds of different musical instruments drove Paige to stop and listen with the children and explore the different sounds instruments make, which led to a project on musical instruments with guest speakers who play different instruments. This teachable moment led into many other teachable moments where the children expressed their interest and drove the focus of study. Paige is a rare teacher in today's teaching climate. All the teachers in the study shared how they used teachable

moments, but many of the teachable moments were on a smaller scale than Paige's embracing of the moment and utilizing it as a springboard into a larger project.

Collay (2006) stated that teachers start their career believing that all children are able to learn and that they are an important part of this process. This sentiment was shared by the early childhood teachers in this study, although there were varying degrees of how to engage students in the classroom and how much of the mandated curriculum to implement each day. This decision-making process for the teachers created some struggle with their professional identity and how they view the learning process for children in their classroom. The participants shared how the teacher struggles to embrace the teachable moments and falls into the grips of the checklist of things which have to be done each day. This inability for the teacher to engage children when teachers intuitively feel the teachable moment is happening creates a conflict within the teacher and a strain on reflective teaching.

Reflective teaching was a subtheme of teachable moments that stood out in the data. Other important subthemes were: curriculum, whole child, and being with children. All four of these subthemes are a part of the teachable moment and being able to engage children in a meaningful manner. But let us begin with the subtheme reflective teaching and the link to teachable moments.

### **Reflective Teaching**

One aspect of being able to embrace a teachable moment was expressed as being present in the classroom and being able to reflect on the happenings of the classroom.

Kate described this reflective way of being:

teaching is something that is not described within a few words. It is something that changes with each class you have and what is going on with those kids and how you meet their needs....that whatever they teach does not make them the teacher, it is what they can make happen in that classroom with whatever they are given.

Some of the teachers I interviewed had been through the national board certification process and credited this process with making them a more reflective teacher. Candace and Kate shared how this process changed them as teachers. They each stated that through the hard work of the national board process they were able to become more reflective teachers in the end. Jaime stated:

I went through the national board process, and that was something else. It was an amazing, it was such hard work, and I spent hundreds of hours video-taping, writing, reflecting, rewriting, meeting with study groups, and it has really helped me to become more of a reflective teacher, and when something, if a child isn't learning then I am able to look at many more angles of okay, why? And I can really question it if something worked. That's great instead of just saying, okay, figure out why it worked, and more importantly when something doesn't work to figure out, okay what happened, what do I need to change.

This process was a way for the teachers to be empowered to make changes in the classroom based on their reflections and knowledge about not only the classroom and the children in the classroom, but also their decision-making knowledge about what children need in that moment in the classroom.

There was an element of change with the reflective teaching process taking place within the life stories of the participants. The participants discussed the required curriculum or textbook series and how the district expects them to use this form of teaching. Whenever the teacher moves toward a prepackaged curriculum, the ability to be a reflective teacher and change the ways you engage children is lessened. The prepackaged curriculum has a more mechanical or step by step way of teaching and engaging children. This moves the teacher away from the more reflective teaching practices which gives them the freedom to pick and choose from a variety of resource materials and their life experiences to come up with best practices for the individual children in their classroom. This leads us to our second subtheme of teachable moments - curriculum.

### **Curriculum**

The curriculum within the classroom is no longer created by early childhood teachers. Historically the early childhood teacher had much more autonomy to create the curriculum based on their knowledge of children's development. Today there is a rigid, standardized curriculum for kindergarten and pre-k. The teachers shared with me the ways that school districts have mandated class time spent on reading, phonics, and math. Kate said, if a school is "on the list," a Title One school, or a low-achieving school as determined by the state and the federal No Child Left Behind law, the rigidity in the classroom is even greater. Autumn described her experiences of teaching kindergarten at a school with such strict standards:

...we had a literacy coach, and we were required to do 60 minutes of literacy centers even with four-year-olds. Sixty minutes of literacy centers every day, and



that included them doing literacy and me doing small groups with children we meet that coach, and she would sit beside us weekly, sometimes daily, to stop and make sure we were doing that. I mean, it wasn't that we were supposed to be doing this, but shut your door and do what you want, but it was, you are required to do this...

The teachers described how these schools used teaching coaches to ensure that the purchased curriculum was not only being implemented but implemented in a way that the district found acceptable.

Candace shared how curriculum for her pre-k students has been a challenge when the teachers are actually using kindergarten curriculum, "Just last year we got a formal pre-k math curriculum before we were teaching the kindergarten curriculum of math because there wasn't a pre-k of everyday math." This is an example of how school districts have embraced curriculum even if the curriculum does not fit with the grade level. As will be explored later, this was an example of pushing down the curriculum and making the expectations higher if pre-k was expected to use the kindergarten curriculum.

This is a great change from the way kindergarten and kindergarten curriculum was conceptualized by the man viewed as the founder of kindergarten, Fredrick Froebel. As Froebel (2000) explained, "...for the condition of child education is none other than comprehension of the whole nature and essence of humanity as manifested in the child..." (p. 239). In Froebel's (2000) book, *Pedagogic of the Kindergarten*, he expressed his views of the best ways to engage the learning of children in kindergarten. Froebel's focus on the child as the pivotal point of reference in the early childhood classroom, for curriculum is being dominated more and more by policies and procedures.

## **Whole Child**

The third subtheme of teachable moments was the whole child. Appropriately, the child was the center topic of conversation as early childhood teachers explored their feelings, views, and identity as teachers. It was not just the child, but the concept of the whole child that was expressed in many different ways throughout the data collection process. This holds true to past research on early childhood teacher research and what they have found to be an important aspect of teaching at this level (Kremenitzer & Miller, 2003; Kuhn, 2011). Teaching the whole child was not only how I have engaged the learning process, but the participants in my study also viewed this as a cornerstone to their identity as an early childhood professional. This view of the child with multifaceted needs that must be met in order to continue growing and developing sparked much interest from the early childhood teachers in this study. The teachers discussed how, without addressing these many needs, children would not be well rounded, or that the whole child would not be nurtured or embraced, or that the only focus was an academic focus, leaving out other parts of the child which were just as important. As Paige shared, “I truly think that the nurturing part envelopes the whole because you are nurturing them socially, emotionally, physically, and academically in every way.” These statements demonstrate the views of these early childhood educators on what is the best approach to “teaching” children. To “honor the child” (Paige) was to recognize not only the academic achievements of the child but also to nurture and respect the child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive stances in the world. Katrina talked about adjusting the curriculum to support a well rounded child. This idea of fostering care of the social and emotional aspects of children was demonstrated by Katrina’s examples of activities

related to acts of kindness in her classroom. She doesn't only talk to her students about social and emotional development. She incorporated these techniques into her daily routines. Jaime shared her view on the whole child:

What I have seen through other grades - it is strictly academic. I haven't even seen anything that addresses the arts either. But that's where, I mean, it all ties back into the basic understanding of child development. That there is, it is a whole child and it is not just about their brains.

As the continual push for more academics moves down into the first experiences of the child in school, the teachers in this study recognized the need for the whole child to be developed in order for children to have a solid foundation for their future, not only in school but also the larger world.

### **Being With Children**

The final subtheme of teachable moments was being with children. This aspect of the early childhood teacher was ever present in this study, once again returning to the child as a reflection of the teacher. The teachers in this study all saw a difference in the way early childhood teachers see themselves in the classroom versus other teachers. Kate described her views: "...kids need to have their hands in it. You all need to just jump in and get involved in the learning process." This was not different from examples other teachers in this study gave. Paige explained: "so, being with them means not only engaging in conversation, whether I am on the floor or whatever... Fully engaged with kids..." This idea of fully engaged was taken very seriously, and the teachers discussed being frustrated with others, including colleagues, student teachers, administrators, and parents who discount its importance. They all agreed that this time was precious and it

was meant to be focused on the children. Candace said that “when children are in the room they are our focus.”

One of the main concerns is to fully engage with children and “honor their thoughts and feelings truly to where you are listening and encouraging them.” Early childhood students are seen as the most valuable part of the early childhood classroom. The curriculum and the environment are secondary to the children themselves. They are seen as the focus, as Jaime shared:

I don't know if 'magical' is the right word, but when you are sitting on the floor building, you know, building with blocks or letting them bring you pretend food. It is kind of like you get so in the zone and you look up and don't realize that the time has passed. Because you just are really so engaged with the kids.

This view of the child being the center of the classroom is a fleeting view as testing and mandates are such a focal point in education. This leads the early childhood teacher to advocate for teaching practices which embrace the individual student versus the whole class approach to teaching. It is also a direct reflection of the mutual respect that early childhood teachers share with early childhood students. By being with children in the classroom, the teacher was moving away from the more rigid ways of the teacher being the expert and the children learning all the information needed from the teacher. The teacher joins the children and engaged the world around them in an effort to create rich learning experiences.

### **Summary**

A knot in the web of words and phrases were created around the concept of teachable moments. Early childhood teachers from this study shared through multiple

examples of life experiences their focus on the child. This focal point of their teaching explored reflective teaching, curriculum, the whole child, and being with children - all aspects of teaching which exposed the value placed on how the teacher engaged students and learned along with students. The thread of the teacher being unique or different as a facilitator of learning exposed yet another area that the early childhood teacher holds up as a part of their professional identity. This led the study to the second knot or theme of experience - advocacy.

### **Theme II: Advocacy: “Bucking the System”**

The data showed a complex web of advocacy for early childhood teachers which created the second theme. The teachers were constantly working for what was best for the children in their classroom. Sometimes this concern of what is best for the early childhood student becomes a battle with others or just a battle within the teachers. Some teachers actually insert themselves into situations where a child was distressed or where they feel a child was at risk for being harmed. Other times, teachers seemed to be advocating for children by actually having conversations with administrators and working to change adverse situations. Some shared how they are working to improve their situation by advocating for themselves and for their place in the profession of teaching. There were five subthemes of advocacy within the data: early childhood is misunderstood, play, developmentally appropriate practices, authentic assessment, and conflict resolution. These categories shine light on what the early childhood teachers value in the classroom.

## **Early Childhood is Misunderstood**

The first subtheme was a frustration for the participants of the study repeated through their stories and examples - misunderstanding of early childhood education in general. All six of the teachers voiced their concern that this misunderstanding was multifaceted. There was a misunderstanding concerning what early childhood teachers encompass, what they need in order to do their job well, and a general misunderstanding of the importance of the teacher. All of the misunderstandings create a need for the early childhood teacher to advocate for what is best for them as well as their students.

The misunderstanding of what the early childhood teacher is comes from colleagues and administrators as well as the general public. Kate was frustrated with the misconception that she just plays all day with the children and does not have other preparation to do before she teaches. “Just because I teach kindergarten and I don’t necessarily have papers to grade doesn’t mean that I don’t have, I mean, I am constantly doing something for those kids,” Kate said. “You know, to keep up with them, there is no, but it is definitely not a forty-hour-a-week work week.” This devaluing of early childhood teachers has been present throughout history as the early childhood teacher was seen in the mothering or nurturing role within the classroom. The assumption was that the work of an early childhood teacher was not work at all. It was natural and fun. As Kate shared, there was a general misunderstanding that early childhood teachers have an easy job compared to not only the other teachers but to the other professions. The early childhood position was seen as a fluff position where the teachers are allowed to play with children and have shorter work days and summers off to enjoy their time. Katrina shared the sentiment:

I feel like it is not, some people value it, but the majority feel like we get the weekends off or we get the summers and all that. They just don't realize what all goes into, what all goes into it...

All of the early childhood teachers expressed one or more times the common misunderstanding that teachers only work while there are students in their classroom. In reality this study showed that teachers work on average 15 to 20 hours outside of the classroom each week and even went to the school on weekends and during holiday breaks.

Using a more hands-on teaching approach requires the early childhood teacher to use many different materials. All six of the early childhood teachers in the study said they lacked sufficient materials. Materials were not readily available, and in fact many of the teachers had to fight with administration to get the supplies needed. Jaime shared an example of having to ask for materials that are essential to her job:

This year we asked for art supplies, and there was no money in the budget for art supplies. So I, you know, go and spend my own money on things. All teachers do. But it gets to the point where you can't buy that kind of thing. We had the basics. We had construction paper, glue, and scissors. But tempera paint, how do you teach a pre-kindergarten class without paint? So, I just reminded them that the creative standards were just as much a standard as literacy and math. And how, you know, if we didn't have paper in the classroom or we didn't have crayons and pencils for the kids to write with, how do you expect me to teach literacy without books?

All acknowledged that it was common practice for them to spend their own money to supplement the supplies needed for the classroom. But there was a limit to their funds, as teachers are not paid exorbitant amounts of money. The lack of understanding of early childhood leads administrators and other persons in power positions to not see a need to provide manipulatives, hands-on materials, or other consumables for the early childhood teacher. In many instances, the early childhood teacher was provided the same curriculum as older grades and then would only be provided basic other supplies. All teachers agreed that this was not enough for them to meet the needs of their students.

### **Play**

The second subtheme of advocacy was the role of play in the early childhood classroom becoming devalued and needing to be advocated to remain. This devaluing has occurred as play makes way for the academic rigor that is seen as pencil-paper and time-on-task activities. Teacher directed activities such as pencil-paper and time-on-task activities portray the image of the child being filled with knowledge by the teacher. Then the knowledge that the child has been filled with is to be shared on achievement tests as a way to make the teacher, school, and child accountable for learning. This is not effective early childhood education. Early childhood education values play and child-directed activities as valid uses of the child's engagement with the environment. Candace shared her view on play:

I feel like they are learning as they are playing, so it is fun to them so therefore they will want to come to school and want to learn and of course with pre-k being some of their first experiences in school. I want them to enjoy the learning and



have that love for learning. I am trying to encourage that and nurture that because I want them to be able to want to come back to school every day.

The more inquiry-based learning gives the child an opportunity to engage the world around them and make sense of the world through their play-based activities. In the early childhood classroom, one example of a play activity was center time. This time has been altered over the past few years as it has been devalued. Kate said that center time has now been replaced with the term, “learning stations.” The learning stations are not the same as centers of the past. The learning stations are geared to focus on literacy practice through all areas of the classroom, including science, word games, folder games, etc. This movement shows the devaluing of more traditional types of play in the early childhood classroom in favor of a more rigid view of children learning skill sets.

Jaime expressed her frustration with an assistant principal: “and even the whole process of centers and (the assistant principal) asking, ‘what are they really doing when they are playing?’ When they are playing, what is it that they are learning?’” This lack of understanding about the value of play has been echoed throughout the data collection. Paige shared her experiences of having to endure administration reviews because she was not seen as being capable of teaching kindergarten, but she was being developmentally appropriate and including play in her classroom. The undervaluing of play was not seen as being rigorous enough for this traditional school setting. This is a vivid reminder of how the accountability movement has affected all students, not just the upper grades. Candace shared her concern for the lack of play in early childhood and the effects that could have on children:

I think socially and emotionally it is going to affect them because play is really working. You are working with your body to find and solve problems and explore. But you are also working with others, so you take that component out, and, you know, I think we could see more children just being self-centered focus on themselves and not always able to get along with others.

This leads one to question if the early childhood programs take away the cornerstones to basic child development. Are mandates taking away fundamental development pieces? And what will this leave early childhood teachers with?

### ***Recess***

A specific aspect of play expressed within the data was recess. All the participants advocated through the fight to keep or increase recess. All participants shared their stories of how over the course of the last few years recess has been seen as a waste of time by administrators in the school. Early childhood teachers have had to fight to have a recess at all. All the teachers have gone to their administration with research demonstrating how time outside helps children with social, physical, and cognitive development. Some of the teachers expressed how they would take learning outdoors, but this became unacceptable for administrators. Activities such as snack, reading, music, and other movement activities were combined with recess time. Kate shared her frustration with threats to remove recess:

It was a frustrating time to be told that students are not allowed to have just recess time – a much needed time to develop many different skills at this young age.

The district or possibly the area superintendent decided that the students needed to be in the classroom for more instructional time instead of “playing.” Most of the

teachers who taught pre-k and k knew the importance of keeping this time for the students and found ways to keep both the district and our principal happy while maintaining our afternoon recess time. Gross motor skill development continues to be the afternoon energy break on the playgrounds as often as the weather would permit.

Kate shared how the team of early childhood teachers worked hard to keep recess and document the learning that was taking place for the administrators. This is a great example of child advocacy and how the teachers are working to keep in place the parts of play and development that they know to be best practices for children.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

The third subtheme of advocacy was developmentally appropriate practices. Teachers from this study shared life experiences of needing to advocate for developmentally appropriate practices for the children. As we take a closer look at the advocacy issues the early childhood teachers from this study have encountered, we work our way back to key questions concerning issues such as play and developmentally appropriate practices. Past research has revealed important information in such areas as expectations for our youngest population (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Saracho, 2012). In line with past research studies, the data from this study shared the concern of all six early childhood teachers and their strong beliefs concerning developmentally appropriate practices. Paige stated:

I am teaching kindergarten, but the pre-k teacher wants militant little soldiers going down the hallway, so there was a whole lot of that going on that I think because I was a little, I mean, I just knew that developmentally what was

appropriate and you know pretty much the stickers and the rewards and all that stuff was not going to be a part of my game.

This view of the child being a soldier down the hallway was an example of the body being disciplined as discussed by Foucault (1995). This rigid approach to being in the school, along with other views of how to use concrete black-and-white ways to discipline children in the classroom, move away from a more developmentally appropriate practice and toward a way of viewing the child as a miniature adult way of being at school. Candace stated her view:

I just don't see any point in forcing them all to sit there and do the same thing when and too they are so full of energy they need to be up and moving around... I think it is just very confining to sit there at a table and color.

Candace's statement supports Foucault's (1995) argument that schools are trying to tame bodies. Jaime expanded on this view: "I truly believe that children should construct their own learning." By working with children in a more developmentally appropriate way, the teachers from this study stated that they had decreased behavior problems. The children taking ownership of their learning and choices allowed them to also take back their power in the classroom and not feel like they are subject to the teacher always directing their decisions of what to explore.

### **Authentic Assessment**

In exploring the early childhood teacher, there was a sense that assessments for the district had been implemented into all the classrooms which leads us to the fourth subtheme of advocacy - authentic assessment. The teachers' life stories painted a picture of required documentation for the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, which

created a level of resistance on the part of the teachers. They all gave glimpses into the different ways they kept track of student progress. It was interesting that the required assessments were not what the teachers used to keep track of their students. One of the school districts has implemented more of a portfolio style assessment, but even in this case the teachers were adding to this documentation pictures and samples of work chosen by the child. In all the cases where teachers were required to DIBEL, described by the authors of DIBELS, Dr. Good and Dr. Kaminski (2009) as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. These assessments were taken with a device called a palm pilot, where the data was entered as the children were reading or answering questions. This style of assessment was noted as not being reliable because the palm pilot on many occasions was not working properly. This is an example of testing being used for the purposes of the administration and not for the best interest of the individual students. Kate shared her frustration with the digital devices distracting the students as you are trying to document their process. Kate stated that this made some of her students feel uneasy because the teacher is looking down at the digital device versus at the student as they document student progress. Once again the focus in using a DIBEL test is moving back to a whole group effect versus looking for the individual needs of the students and more authentic ways of knowing how children are developmentally.

All of the teachers in this study shared how they conduct authentic assessments in their classroom to help them understand where the child was developmentally or where the child was on the spectrum of skill development. Katrina shared a way of authentically accessing the children in her class:

...like prepositions, for position words... I have them pull out and, you know, have them walk with a little pig or something, alright, put the pig on the block. Graduated order, I have unifix cubes, and I have different sizes and I ask them to put those in order from shortest to tallest or tallest to shortest.

In this example, Katrina was assessing the students by having them move about the room and place a toy pig on, over, and behind other objects to demonstrate position words. This form of assessment allows the young child to move around the room and not only talk about the assessment but demonstrate meaning.

In addition to using assessments for their own purposes, the teachers utilized assessments so administrators and other teachers would support their more unique teaching methods. Paige shared her ways of sharing documentation with anyone who walks down the hallways in her school:

I basically do documentations out on the wall in the hallway to make. I think that learning needs to be very visible to everybody, not just my parents, my kids' parents, but to other teachers because I think it is important to model it to them...you can just see that it is so beyond what the standards are because they are getting so in-depth on different parts of whatever we are studying.

This way of sharing authentic assessment with the whole school shares one way early childhood teachers can assess without pencil-paper tasks or testing in the classroom.

Autumn and Candace used data books used for more authentic assessment: "...we have a data folder...it has everything that was on the report card, and it has places for the students like a portfolio and places to show the children's work..." The data book was a way for the school district to get the paper documentation from the teacher but also see

student development through work samples and photographs. This was an example of the teachers taking more authentic forms of assessment and blending them with documented required assessments.

### **Conflict Resolution**

The fifth and last subtheme of advocacy was classroom discipline. Classroom discipline was often discussed throughout the data collection. The teachers all shared how their schools implemented discipline in varying ways. Many of the teachers discussed classroom guidance versus a classroom management plan, the difference being that classroom management was a more black-and-white program implemented and driven by the teacher. The teacher was always in control of classroom management systems. Classroom guidance was based on mutual respect between the teacher and the student and according to most of the teachers from this study was a more appropriate style of conflict resolution that gives the children power to solve their own problems. The mutual respect between the teacher and student moves the teacher away from a more authoritative role into more of a mentoring role. Jaime expressed how she always spoke to the children about “our classroom” versus identifying the classroom as “her classroom.” Jaime also shared her views that conflict resolution is a way for her to promote feelings of safety and comfort among the children.

I really believe strongly in teaching the kids conflict resolution skills because if they are able to resolve their own conflict then, I mean, if they learn those skills and keep going in other grades and it is so funny whenever I taught kindergarten, I had a group of girls and we were at group time, and one of them said, ‘Ms. Dillard, we have a problem and pointed to the other girl. Can we go over there

and talk?’ And I’m like, ‘yes.’ They went over and solved their own conflict and came back.....that was a big deal but then that they could talk it through and work it out. So I am a real strong believer in teaching them those steps in conflict resolution.

In this example Jaime empowered the children to learn how to deal with their own problems and how to talk to others in a way that will resolve conflict. This view of the classroom as not only the teacher space but as the community-of-the-class space illustrates a particular view of how an early childhood teacher sees her place in the lives of children.

Paige expressed that her favorite part of teaching is the classroom guidance piece:

I absolutely love working with children and working with it. I love problems and I love to, you know, to have the peace table to solve it. And I love to watch them work and again from the beginning of the year and then to watch it work in January, February, March, just building, that is my favorite part of teaching.

Because they feel so confident about they are grown up and they can take care of their problems on their own, and I think that is a great thing to watch and to try to implement some kind of guidance piece versus a management piece.

In this excerpt, Paige shared her love for turning over the power of problem solving to the children and watching them over the months hone this skill set and learn to negotiate and ultimately resolve their problems without the intervention of a teacher. This is an important life skill in the early childhood classroom. As Candace stated, “I think that is big especially on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten shoulders to teach character traits - the character habits and to problem solve...That is really big for us.” All of the teachers



shared times that they had to defend or advocate for their style of classroom guidance versus having a more black-and-white form of discipline posted on the wall.

Administrators did not agree with a more free form of classroom guidance, leading to the advocacy for a stronger relationship between the early childhood teacher and administrator in order for the administrator to trust the teacher and know that they are professional decision makers in the classroom.

Child advocacy was ever present in all the teachers' life stories. Early childhood teachers are required in this accountability climate to advocate for what they believe to be best practices for the young children in their classrooms. The amount of effort the early childhood teachers are putting toward making others understand their classrooms and role within the classroom seems exhausting. This was in addition to the advocacy for play, recess, developmentally appropriate practices, authentic assessment, and conflict resolution. All the early childhood teachers in this study see these areas as vital parts of the early childhood classroom.

### **Summary**

Children are the focus of the early childhood teacher as she works to advocate for their best learning experiences and environment. As an advocate for the child the themes: early childhood is misunderstood, play, developmentally appropriate practices, authentic assessment, and conflict resolution were all a part of not creating child advocacy. The experiences of these teachers emitted the need for others to be educated concerning the values of early childhood teaching practices and best practices of early childhood students.

### **Theme III: Relationships: “Every Walk of Life is at Our School”**

In moving from the themes of teachable moments to advocacy to relationships, one can see the ways early childhood teachers are engaging with the world around them. They first have a priority to engage and work with children and then have to work to advocate for best practices in promoting learning and mutual respect, but it is important to realize that the relationships support advocacy. In this study, relationships were a vital part of the life stories of the early childhood teachers. Some were rocky relationships while others featured partners working toward a common goal. The early childhood teachers seemed to shift from enjoying relationships with others in the school to struggling to nurture relationships in their professional lives. There were many different types of relationships present: relationships with self/family, children, parents, colleagues, and administration. All these areas are explored through the voice of the early childhood teacher.

#### **Teaching Chooses You**

The participants in this study expressed their relationship with self as teacher. It seems fitting to start the subtheme within relationships by first looking at the teacher. This leads one back to the question that drives the study - what does it mean to be an early childhood teacher today? With an effort to move closer to a deeper understanding of the early childhood teacher, I focused on asking teachers to share stories and feelings about their time in college and then their first teaching experiences. Bringing the past into the future (Pinar, 2004) through memories always evoked strong feelings about the profession and the foundation of each teacher’s views of teaching. All the teachers I interviewed acknowledged that they felt teaching in the early childhood years was what

they were meant to do, but would stumble to find the words as to why that was. As Kate shared, “I know that teaching is not something that I chose. It was just something that, I mean, I don’t know, it just kind of chose me, I guess.” This struggle to explain their identity formation as a teacher was a common factor within the study. All felt that being a teacher was a large part of their identity. Autumn connected her identity as an early childhood teacher with her views as a humanitarian, full of compassion for our youngest students in society:

...being an early childhood teacher is really a part of who you are. You can’t shake it. You can’t stop thinking about the little one who is living in a hotel, and you know that they come to school to eat and because it is a safe place.

Jaime had a sense of loss and confusion when she left teaching and could not be identified as an early childhood teacher:

I think related to that passion part is, I mean it is part of your identity, whenever I left teaching four weeks ago, and it is so hard whenever people ask what do you do not to say, “I’m a teacher.” People on facebook will post you will always be a teacher. Well, I mean it is hard not to. It is your identity. That was a big loss for me, was a loss of identity. That is what I have been, that is all I have been. I have been so proud to say that I have been.

Although Jaime felt a sense of loss by not being an early childhood teacher, it seemed that her loss was also the loss of relationships with the students, parents, and colleagues. Relationship with self as teacher was hard for the participants to express with words. This reflection on the meaning behind their profession was seen as a part of them as a whole. This was not a separate piece as they expressed but just a thread within their

make-up of identity, as was the desire to work with children and have a meaningful relationship with students.

## **Children**

The relationship with children was so vivid in the data review that from this study one could infer that children are what early childhood teachers use to gauge almost every part of their profession. The teachers spoke of creating a classroom community. This relationship with children and the ability to make the children feel safe was an important aspect of the classroom community. Teachers really wanted the children to know how they felt about them. Jaime explained the relationship building she has done at her school:

The thing I am most proud of, I think just the relationships that I have built with them (kids). I still have, I mean, these big fifth and sixth graders that are taller than me walk up and give me hugs, I mean, the other, there's a fourth grade class across the hall – you know the kids are like, 'can we go play with the little kids, can we go to Ms. Dillard's class?' ...Just that I built relationships with the students and their families so I'm yeah, I am really proud of that, and I am going to miss that a lot.

There was a source of tension as some teachers recognized that other teachers do not always share the same views on mutual respect and classroom community. Jaime expressed her concern: "It sounds like common sense, but the number of people who don't think of children as human almost, it is just like they are there." Paige also shared her views on how some teachers in our schools view the system as "running a business" or "herding cattle," moving the children from one place to the other without regard to

their needs as a human. This dehumanizing of the children takes away the individuality and creativity from the classroom. The children are seen as a number or a test score rather than a human being whose development is being supported by a caring professional. With more of an “agenda” (Paige) in the classroom, there was not room for the creative expression of individuals. This would work against what parents, teachers, and administrators should want for all children.

Katrina shared a heartfelt story of a kindergarten student in another class who struggled on the playground at the beginning of school. This relationship and compassion Katrina felt toward students led her to intervene by comforting the child and trying to understand his distress:

And he was just sobbing. He had his tissues there, and I am sure that the teacher just gave him the tissues and said, shoo shoo, go on out. And I said, ‘what is wrong?’ and he said that he missed his mom. And he was just hysterical and so we talked a little bit and I said ‘you know I miss my mom too sometimes and you will see her soon after school.’ And so I said ‘let’s go in and get a drink,’ and we went in and got a drink and he gave me a big hug and I just told him that it was going to be okay and he said he didn’t have any friends...

This example of Katrina’s speaks volumes about her compassion and views on the importance of caring and nurturing children socially and emotionally in the school setting. Katrina went back on the playground and helped this little boy find friends to play with. She expressed that he was so happy and from that day forward did not cry on the playground. This way of connecting with children and engaging them illuminates the data from the early childhood teachers’ life stories.

## Parents

In addition to the relationship with children there was a relationship with the parents of the children. It seems natural if a teacher would like to build a connection with children to also reach out and build a connection with parents who know children best. Kate expressed her concern with parents supporting her efforts as a teacher in the classroom. She stated that she would be happy if her parents would just take the time to talk and engage the children in critical thinking at home. This would lend significant support to the learning efforts at school. From Kate's point of view, the parents were not as connected to school and their child as she would prefer.

Within the data collected there was one surprising component, which was the portrayal of the parent-teacher relationship. It was pointed out that even though parents are such an important part of the support system for the children, the schools are not very welcoming to the parents. Paige shared how parents are perceived by the principal at her school:

My school is not so family friendly in that our principal wants them in and out the door, and if they are going to be there when the bell rings, they better have a sticker on their shirt that says they are a guest in our building...I just see that it is no longer this kind of almost family oriented, where our parents are invested in their child's daily activities at school. It is just, there is a coldness to it.... I see a lot of teachers that don't want parents in their room, and I am thinking, are you kidding me, how great. To me it is a big bonus, and I don't understand, that and again I think it is an agenda thing and it is getting kids to kind of really comply,

and that is something that maybe a teacher is not real comfortable showing that side or something. I don't know.

Overall the participants viewed parents as part of a valuable, necessary partnership within the classroom. Most of the participants shared stories of how they include parents as part of their classroom community. There were even examples of how the classroom would be opened up after hours or how parents would assist the teacher by creating activities at home. Autumn shared her experiences of how she worked to include parents in her classroom:

The first time I said that I was opening up my classroom and all the parents are coming on this day. And the other teachers said, 'what are you going to do with them there?' I said, 'well I am going to get out all my different board games and have different stations and my parents and have them teach the children all the different rules of the games that I don't have time to teach them.' And we all had such a great time.... I felt like such a rebel.

Autumn's rebellion was an act of advocacy for the relationships between parents, children, and teachers. Autumn went on to say how proud the students were that their parents were able to join them at school. This makes the children see how their parents are supporting their efforts at school and how the teacher and parents work together for the best interests of the child.

Candace is moving from a half day pre-kindergarten setting to a full day pre-kindergarten next year. She has strong relationships with her parents but worries that when her class moves to full day the relationships might be compromised because the parents will not be able to join the class if they are working during the school hours.

Candace's view that the parents are a part of the classroom is one way to strengthen parent teacher relationships. Candace does not view the parents as disconnected from the classroom but as a piece of the whole classroom, much as some teachers would view colleagues at school.

### **Colleagues**

The fourth subtheme of relationships was colleagues. In describing colleagues there was a sense that some colleagues were seen as a collaborative member of a team and others were seen as an adversary member of a team. The teachers revealed that their colleagues had diverse views of their relationship with children. This difference in how teachers engage and see the relationship with children was stressful for some of the teachers in this study. Although it was very clear that they wanted to have camaraderie with their colleagues and wanted their colleagues to see them as an equal in the school. Paige demonstrated how the relationship with colleagues can be rocky at best:

I was not exactly welcomed with open arms by my new teammates. After our first group interaction, we quickly realized our philosophical differences. We began our chat with deciding we would all plan our curriculum together and quickly found out that while I was planning project work they were planning chapter one of their reading series introducing the letter 'm.' I explained to them how isolating the letters each week was defeating the purpose of project work and my intentions with children. Children would learn the letters throughout the year but in the context of what "big ideas" we would be investigating. That recognition started the divide of our team planning meetings – they had their



plans and I just knew I had to have mine. Everyone was cordial with one another but the idea of working together weekly to plan was not possible.

In her protocol writing, Autumn wrote of a time when a colleague wanted to know where she obtained the best worksheets for her pre-kindergarten class. Autumn felt uncomfortable having to share that this was not her teaching philosophy and that she did not use worksheets. The colleague viewed her statement as judgmental and was upset by Autumn sharing her views on developmentally appropriate practices. This struggle to maintain a professional relationship with colleagues while advocating for developmentally appropriate practices was a fine line in many cases.

Other teachers in the study had better luck working with colleagues to develop plans for their classroom. Kate stated that as a team leader, she has a wonderful group of teachers that work well together and share planning and teaching experiences. Candace shared how much she missed being able to have more control of the curriculum and work with her colleagues to develop themes and different creative components to add to the classroom. Katrina described how this year she is working with a colleague who is not happy being an early childhood teacher and how this affects how she is able to implement different activities in her shared, prefab space. This frustration with the climate of the relationship clearly affects how teachers are able to perform their job. This need to advocate for the child and work at times against those teachers around you can be an exhausting feat for early childhood teachers. But it is not only colleagues who affect the work-climate relationships of early childhood teachers. Administrators can play an even more important role in the abilities of the teacher to do what is best for their early childhood students.

## **Administration**

The fifth and last subtheme of relationships is focused on administration. This relationship was vivid in all the six participants' data collection. It became clear that the early childhood teacher was working in a hierarchical system with the administration at the top and the early childhood teacher somewhere below. The teachers repeatedly noted that administrators questioned their abilities to teach, nurture children, and effectively manage a classroom. There were also examples with new principals and other administrators who supported the efforts of the early childhood teacher. In some situations, the early childhood teacher's relationship with the administrator made the teacher so uncomfortable that they were willing to leave teaching.

One of the most troublesome facts of the relationship with the administration was the lack of understanding of early childhood. Jaime told the story with her experience of an assistant principal not understanding the management techniques in her classroom:

I got written up for not having something by an assistant principal. And it was because I didn't have a classroom management plan and just reminding him that my kids were some of the best behaved children in the building and they were learning to do the right thing just because they were supposed to do. Not because they were going to get stickers or candy. My former principal went back and tore it up.

This teacher used conflict resolution instead of a discipline system up on the wall. This was not good enough for the assistant principal, but the principal had more understanding of early childhood education. But having to continually explain your procedures and why they are meaningful in the classroom is such a strain on the

relationship between administration and early childhood teachers. Candace expressed as a first grade teacher she was not allowed to take the children outside as much as she would have liked, and this led her to speak to the administration about her concern. In her situation, the administration listened to her, but in the end nothing changed. This is a very discouraging feeling to express concerns as a professional and not have these impact future policies or procedures. Kate and Katrina both also had to fight with administration for appropriate developmental time for their kindergarten students. For Kate this was fruitful, and she was able to adjust her schedule based on the needs of the children, but for Katrina, as with Candace the administration listened but did not take action or allow the teacher to take action. This leaves the teacher feeling very discouraged.

Beijaard et al (2004), found that "...being a teacher is a matter of the teacher being seen as a teacher himself or herself and by other; it is a matter of arguing and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated" (p. 113). The world that the early childhood teacher is working within has changed in the matter of accountability. Many are experiencing for the first time a resistance to the ways they are engaging young children. This creates stress for the early childhood teacher and leaves a feeling of under appreciation and disconnectedness.

### **Summary**

Relationships and teaching are interwoven and cannot be disconnected from the experience of the early childhood teacher. In working with our youngest population in public school, the need to build home-to-school relationships, as well as relationships to educate and advocate for the children with administrators and colleagues, is essential. Relationships with students' family and their support of the early childhood teacher's

work is also vital. So in review, the early childhood teachers from this study felt like part of their identity was working with young children, although in order to feel success the teacher needs relationships with others. Relationships with children, parents, colleagues, and administration are woven into the teaching practices, leaving the early childhood teacher vulnerable to sustaining these sometimes volatile relationships in order to carry out their professional responsibilities. This leads to the stress and struggles the early childhood teacher feels and the havoc wreaked on the structure of the classroom.

#### **Theme IV: Stress and Struggles: “Wreaking Havoc on the Structure of the Classroom”**

##### *Researcher Reflection*

*During my time teaching, there was not a required curriculum. The school districts in which I worked saw a chance to save money on the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curriculum by allowing the teachers to create the materials needed. I did not realize at the time how much freedom I had as a teacher. I was free to create and adapt my materials and plans according to the needs of the children and the pace that felt right in the classroom. Since I have been out of the classroom, I have often heard from my peers how things have changed and the shock I would experience if I were to return to the classroom. This warning of how drastically things had changed led me to this research project. This is how I define being a teacher- being able to create a learning experience for the children that best meets their needs.*

The stress and struggle in teaching is apparent throughout the interviews. Early childhood teachers have more demands and requirements than ever before in their teaching careers. There are many different types of stress that the early childhood teacher

encounters: family stress, loss of power, time, the push down, testing, and leaving teaching. These difficulties have always been a part of the early childhood teacher experience. The question was how all the stress and struggles affect the identity of the early childhood teacher.

## **Family**

During the first interviews, the participants expressed many feelings about the stress on familial relations due to their careers. Candace shared the guilt caused by working on evenings and weekends in order to do her job well:

I feel guilty just going up to school every weekend, just leaving my husband and daughter at home and being away from them during that time. I always feel guilty not being there...Just the, me being gone to school and them thinking that, you know, school is more important than they are type of thing.

Candace's daughter is an early childhood student. Ironically, the profession to which she has dedicated her life was now taking away from the early childhood student who lives in her home. This struggle to do her best at her job but also feeling stress that she is away from her family was echoed by other early childhood teachers. Autumn said, "I think all work and no play makes for a dull wife and mom (laughs)." And Katrina said, "I think it makes me not as good a mom as I should be." The stress of having their jobs take them away from family after hours and on weekends was confirmation that the early childhood teacher is experiencing life-changing levels of work due to modern classroom mandates. On the weekends, holidays, and after-school hours, all the teachers in this study expressed making things that would help each child in the classroom. Without this time away from family, there was a sense that the classroom would not be as fruitful or that

there would be pieces missing from the classroom. The efforts of the teachers to support the classroom by using their personal time were important to not only the students but also to the preparedness of the teacher and her emotional state. This representation of how early childhood teachers use time away from family reemphasizes how important it is to them to make their classroom materials meet the needs of every child and not put everybody in the “pigeon hole because they are not cut from the same bolt” (Autumn).

How does the stress that teachers feel affect the classroom? The classroom was the extension of the early childhood teacher, and it naturally follows that stress at home will affect the teacher in the class, and, in turn, the students. One of the main reasons for teachers needing to use time away from family before and after school hours and weekends is due to the loss of power over the curriculum.

### **Loss of Power**

Kate said early childhood teachers have lost power by not being allowed to make decisions in the classroom as professionals should. The decision of what and how to teach in the classroom is being thrust upon early childhood teachers leaving them with a loss of power.

We want to do fun meaningful thematic units and things that are going to grasp the kids’ attention and keep them involved and make them want to learn more, and all the while having fun and do creative things, have something to show for it at the end, and we are just not allowed to do it.

Another area of power loss was how money was used within the school. A discovered theme was the struggle to get early childhood recognized as a valuable way to spend money. Autumn and Candace both stated that the school district has spent a lot of

money on their curriculum materials and, therefore, expects them to use it. This school district mandate sheds light on the power that has been removed from the early childhood teacher to make curriculum decisions.

Another theme involving money and power was school bond money. When bond issues were passed in two different districts, there was an understanding that the early childhood portion of the building would be built to make the environment more appropriate for the youngest students. In both instances after the bond passed, the money was diverted to other projects, giving a clear message to the early childhood teachers that they are not valuable enough to receive funds for their classrooms. Katrina, who has a classroom in a nonattached portable building, shared her frustration after finding out that bond money would be used to replace a library:

You know they are doing some construction, making a new library, and they did this whole vote for this bond issues, and everybody was under the impression that we were going to get rid of the prefabs and connect the gym to the building so it was safe. And make bigger kindergarten rooms and all this. And so it passed and everything was great, and then one day I looked at the sign out front of the school last summer: 'Lake Park new addition, new library and science room' And nobody had even asked for a new library. We had a fine library.

Katrina's students have to go from the prefab building to the main building in order to engage with the rest of the school. This creates a power play in the classroom. The classrooms are located away from the school, giving a clear separation from the school and creating a lesser-than feeling or break in the continuity of the school. This power stress leaves the teacher to deal with parents who are not happy their child is in a small,

portable building outside of the school. The teacher also feels isolated. Katrina spoke of having years where she could not go to the restroom all day because there is not another teacher to watch her kindergarteners while she is away. So, in effect, the loss of a support system due to the disconnection was part of the power play.

### *Time*

A subset of the loss of power was the conflict that time created in the lives of early childhood teachers. This struggle for the early childhood teacher encompasses doing more creative, child-directed activities. There was a need for flexibility and time that seemed ever lacking. The teachers felt a constraint in many cases concerning not only the amount of time but the mandated use of time. Kate shared her struggle with time in the classroom:

And so we, I kind of try to work those in as much as possible as far as what used to be centers in kindergarten, very little time for blocks and pretend center...It is something that we have not been told that we can't do it, but you would have to fit the time and the space to be honest.

This struggle between the mandated uses of time in the classroom and trying to fit in things that the early childhood teachers deem important experiences makes for a stressful balancing act. Candace shared:

I'm seeing myself taking out more of my theme things that I used to do, like I would read more theme-related books. I would just do more theme-related activities, and I'm seeing that I am having to take out some of those things to get in, to squeeze the math, and the phonics, and the readers and writers workshop.



Stress and struggle envelop the early childhood teacher as she facilitates learning that was handed down from the different hierarchical levels of schooling while she tries to keep some of the activities she knows to be best for children. Paige struggled with time within her implementation of some of the more in-depth activities. “I haven’t been able to really capture fully that, but it is due to time,” Paige said. Jaime detailed how in her school district, there was mandated time for pre-kindergarten to do so many minutes of both math and literacy time. This demand for time to be used in a specific way demonstrates the early childhood teacher’s struggle. The ability to flow with the inquiry and teachable moments within the classroom are hindered by the mandated segments of time for each subject.

### **The Push Down**

The second subtheme of stress and struggles was how to deal with the idea that “more is better” in our school districts. This more-is-better idea was playing out by pushing down the requirements to make the curriculum seem more rigorous. The view of the curriculum in this push down mode was described as moving standards and objectives or rigid boxed set of lesson plans down to a proceeding grade level. This is different from my view of curriculum as including all learning taking place between the student within the walls of school and outside in the world. All six early childhood teachers discussed how the curriculum has been pushed down. The push down was described as moving curriculum requirements from one grade down to the proceeding grade. Many of the teachers compared teaching older grades to kindergarten and pre-kindergarten and how rising expectations have moved down into the current pre-kindergarten or kindergarten class. This movement to make the children rise to a higher performance

level is very stressful for teachers. The teachers recognize that children will hit a point where it is impossible to meet the requirements. Jaime said:

It is not like I lower expectations...But you know, legislatively that is kind of what we are doing all over the place. We are saying, let's just push it down and that will help them learn it. And just some of the things that they do, the kids are just absolutely, it is not appropriate for them.

Kate shared Jaime's sentiment concerning making sure the curriculum was not being watered down just because the students are younger. Kate wants to make sure that her classroom has high expectations and that the children are challenged to learn. But if the push down of curriculum continues, many of the early childhood teachers worry about the future of early childhood education. When teachers were being measured by the students' test scores, there was a concern that at some point the expectations will exceed the student's abilities to perform. There was expressed concern about whether we will be requiring pre-kindergarteners to be reading soon. Autumn's principal asked the teachers to start using sight words with the pre-kindergarten students and begin the reading process. The push down is very damaging for the early childhood student with lasting effects on their abilities in the future (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Cooper, Capo, Mathes, & Gray, 2007; Kremenitzer, et. al., 2003; Ray & Smith, 2010). There were also concerns about the way students are labeled. Paige expressed that she believes we could be creating special needs disabilities by labeling children as not able to perform, when in reality they are not developmentally ready to perform. If we label students as failing, the negative impact this could have on the student could change the course of their lives.

## Testing

Mandated tests in early childhood have grown increasingly common and create negative consequences. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) warned of the troubling images of the testing movement, or, most specifically, of the No Child Left Behind mandates. This warning of how testing and measurements are being used for the purposes of reforming schools was found in this study. Kate, Candace, Autumn, and Katrina expressed that testing young children to meet school district mandates left the other children with no one to watch them. There was also a concern with the digital devices used to record the answers to the test from each child. All the participants from this study had experienced faulty recording for the mandated tests.

Paige, Kate, and Candace all shared how the children would resist testing in their own ways. Some children would refuse to leave the classroom to work with the teacher. Paige said of her past kindergarteners: "I know when I did the assessments for DIBELS, you know, it was like pulling teeth to get them to come out and do it." Some children would just say anything in an effort to speed up the process that would return them to the prior activities. Other teachers would cry or sigh sharing their struggle with the testing process. There was a unified feeling that the children are not vested in this type of accountability. The children do not understand the meaning behind the tests or why they have to take time away from their other activities for the process. Kate shared how she would try to give the children a visual of their accountability man moving along the achievement continuum. Some children would respond to this motivation to answer the questions, but other children were simply not motivated by this.

If we expect children to care about testing and accountability, it would seem that there should be a connection to their world and their learning experiences. Jaime shared her concerns:

Consequences of fill in the bubble? I think it goes in the exact opposite direction of critical thinking and problem solving. The kids are learning that there is one right answer for something. In life I have never found very much of a situation where there is one right answer, and if the kids aren't doing things where they are using those thinking skills and stuff then if they are not doing them as kids, how are you expecting them to later in life?

For kindergarten, the mandated testing process happened multiple times throughout the year, but for some of the pre-kindergarten teachers, there was only one mandated test at the beginning of the year.

When asked during the interviews if the mandated test results were used to alter the curriculum in the classroom or as a way to identify how to help a child in the classroom, the teachers from this study always stated no. Paige shared her inquiry into how the test results were used: "So, I was asking a couple of the first grade teachers, 'you know, what do you do with this stuff?' And they said, 'absolutely nothing, it is all for the district, for show, you know.'" Therefore the time, energy, and effort to conduct tests were just to satisfy the administration or school district. Even for the early childhood teachers in this study, it was hard to find the connection between the importance of tests and the day-to-day happenings in the classroom. The pre-k teachers who used a data book more as a portfolio of the child's development shared how this connection could be made. This way of recording data and even giving the children power and control over

their work samples that are placed in the data book create a more vested interest in the assessment process. It also creates a way for the teacher to utilize the data, which made it easier for them to justify taking the time to gain a clearer picture of how to work with their students in the future. The results of the mandated DIBEL, benchmark, and other tests are reported to the school district. These tests are seen as a thing to do that is checked off. The teachers are not vested in this process or do not value this process.

All the early childhood teachers expressed the same word for the mandatory testing in their classroom - stress. The stress was created for both the teacher and the student. Candace shared how the administration used the testing as a way to measure if the teacher was effective in the first grade classroom. She spoke of how the children in her classroom could not read and were not able to effectively take the test, but this was used as a way to determine if she was a good teacher. These pressures are currently creating the backdrop for teaching and how the teacher engages with students.

### **Leaving Teaching**

The final theme from the data collection was the notion of leaving teaching as a result of all the stress and struggles. Most of the participants shared stories of a colleague or themselves thinking of leaving or actually leaving the field due to the stress. I found that all of the teachers in this study identified themselves exclusively as an early childhood teacher, but, as with any situation, there is always a line in the sand. If the stress and struggles escalated to a point where the line is crossed, teachers questioned whether they could rise to the occasion of teaching each day under these conditions or whether they could remain in the field at all. Katrina had a colleague who was teaching kindergarten for the first time as an alternatively certified early childhood teacher. She

had not been in an early childhood classroom and found the challenges to be too much. She will not be returning to teach kindergarten next year. Autumn recounted the story of an early childhood teacher in her district not being asked to return the following year. The stress of being an early childhood teacher was ever present in the field.

Two of the teachers in this study discussed leaving the field. For both of these teachers, it was not the daily engagement with students, parents, or even colleagues that dismayed them. It was the daily engagement with an administration that did not understand teachers' role in the school or the importance of their roles in the lives of students. That the administration was so difficult to bear that teachers were willing to leave the profession is obviously a troubling thought for those interested in the future of education. Paige shared:

It was a horrible year, and I was going to quit at the end of the year. She (the administration) did not like my style, and she had teacher trainers coming in to observe me to give me advice on how to teach.

This devaluing of the teacher's role in the classroom was almost the line in the sand for Paige. Having another person state that you do not know what you are doing and need to have another teacher come into your classroom to support your teaching is very demeaning. Paige had three different teacher trainers that school year. At least one of the teacher trainers tried to help the administration understand developmentally appropriate practices. This was not acceptable for the administration. Paige ended up staying at her school, but only because the administration did not.

The idea of leaving teaching was a reality for another teacher, Jaime, who participated in this study. During the study, she left her teaching post to work at a local

college. It is apparent that Jaime loves children and identifies herself as an early childhood teacher so her case was a troubling one. Jaime believes the move was best for her family. Then there was the canned response, as Jaime called it, that she was seeking to grow professionally and find new challenges. Then she shared other parts of her story, explaining her misunderstood classroom procedures and constant fight to keep the environment of her students developmentally appropriate while finding materials and equipment to ensure meaningful experiences in the classroom on a daily basis. The story that I heard was Jaime struggling with the stress of being an early childhood teacher when she was not only undervalued but also misunderstood by an administration that cannot see what is best for children. "...there were a lot of administration things going on that drove me crazy...I didn't feel like I had the time or energy to fight that fight." This expression of not having the time or energy to fight speaks volumes as to the current teaching climate early childhood teachers are facing daily. Why should early childhood teachers have to fight so hard in order to do their job?

### **Summary**

The threads that create each knot or theme were woven into a large ball of stress and struggles for the early childhood teacher. From balancing home and work to loss of power, the push down, testing, and leaving teaching the early childhood teacher is in a state of crisis. This state of crisis, in which the teacher tries to find balance and the strength to do meaningful work that the teacher believes in, is important to understand as one moves closer and closer to the essence of the early childhood teacher.

This chapter explored the themes that emerged from the data collection from six expert early childhood teachers with five-plus years teaching experience in the public

school classroom. The themes: teachable moments, advocacy, relationships, and stress and struggles - create glimpses into the world of the early childhood teacher. These views of the teacher as the center and most vital part of the early childhood classroom are vivid in this study. There were images of troubling times for the early childhood teacher and an impression that the profession is at risk. In the following chapter, the exploration of the themes of the study in relationship with other research and analysis expand this study into a synthesis stage of exploring what it all means.



## CHAPTER V

### COMPLICATING THE CONVERSATION: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER

Pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact are the mindful skills that enable a teacher to act improvisationally in always-changing educational situations  
~ van Manen, 1991

#### *Researcher Reflection*

*The early childhood teacher seems so close to me yet so far away. The conditions of teaching are both familiar and foreign to my life experiences. During this study, I found myself asking, what caused me to leave the classroom? I found that conflict between being a mother and a teacher put me in a state of unending guilt. Being the best teacher I know to be and giving my classroom students all my energy, time, planning, thoughts, and extra money left little to give of myself to my new son. I struggled with what I knew to be the best experiences for my new baby versus what I was able to provide him as an exhausted pre-kindergarten teacher. At the same time, I would not settle for anything less than the best teaching practices. My students were draining me of all my energy during the day, leaving me with nothing left to give after hours to my baby or to prepare for the next day. The pull became too much for me and pushed me to explore working at the preschool level three days a week with the possibility of working on an advanced degree in the future.*

*The intention was to always go back into the early childhood classroom after my son started school, but I had another child. Then when both children were in school full time, I found that many of my teaching friends were fleeing the field and expressing their concern about early childhood education. This led me to this research study and the search to find what it means to be an early childhood teacher today.*

This effort to move closer to the essence of the early childhood teacher took one deeper into a search for meaning. As I engaged in a form of reflective thinking or praxis (Freire, 1970) with the themes created from the data, there were lingering threads of phrases and nagging words that stood out for me. The lingering threads and nagging words emerged from the voice of the early childhood teachers and produced three main areas to explore further. The first underlying impression from the themes was the voice of the children. Although I did not speak with any children as part of the data collection of this study, their voice was heard loud and clear through the interpretations of their teachers.

Another powerful voice was the voice of oppression as the “art” of teaching was being lost in today’s teaching climate. van Manen (1991), in his book, *The Tact of Teaching*, discusses this art form of teaching as the pedagogical tact of teaching. This way of teaching, which involves reflective practices and the participation of the students in the decision making of what to explore in the classroom, is being wiped out. As a more rigid interpretation of curriculum and how to make a classroom more accountable moves into place, there is little room for the “art” of teaching, to breathe and grow in the learning environment. And the final voice was the voice of warning against the negative practices which might become the norm in the early childhood profession. This warning

voice, or “red flags,” speak of all the things that will not only be lost but could also be damaging to others if early childhood education is altered in such drastic negative ways.

### **Voice of the Children**

The underlying voice of children was heard throughout this study. Early childhood teachers very clearly project their relationships, experiences, and feelings toward children as a means to make a positive impact in the life of a child. The stories told of how children move throughout the school, how they engage in the classroom, and how they are treated by sometimes misunderstanding teachers or administrators. One of the most powerful messages was that the individuality of the child is not valued in public schools. Teachers from this study shared their views concerning the devaluing of individuality of children within all the themes, teachable moments, advocacy, relationships, and stress and struggles. Paige summed this concept up as:

...the mutual respect idea and the guidance that goes with that, and I wish I could impress upon future teachers or teachers today that are very demeaning to children. It is so important, to be respectful of children and to honor their thoughts and feelings truly to where you are listening and encouraging them and I just, it just makes me sick and I don't care whether you are in poverty or in the school I am in, I am seeing the lack of a mutual respect and it's just the cow movement, the herding of cows...

This study left me with the impression that the children were seen as a number (Taubman, 2009) and not as a member of a community of learners. All of the early childhood teachers in this study recognized and valued the individual voices of the child but fought each day to find a way for the voice of the child to shine in their classroom.

This fight was not fought without reflective thinking and intense planning on the part of the teacher. This highlights the importance of the early childhood teacher in the life of a child. But each teacher shared in their life stories that most colleagues and administrators do not appreciate their understanding about the importance of a child's voice being heard within the school setting.

### **Silence**

The child is becoming silent in the realm of public schools. The movement for accountability has created a movement against the voice of the child. The child is not allowed to freely express individuality and explore within the classroom. Ray and Smith (2010) found that kindergartens have lost their creative thought as a result of the preparations for standardized testing, and they warn against not teaching the whole child. The connection between the Ray and Smith (2010) study and this study is profound. The kindergarten teachers from this study echoed the sentiment and also shared concerns of the future for young children. Jaime put into words the concern she had for young students:

...how it affects the kids is, I mean, if you don't understand what is appropriate and for the kids then you are going to do things that are inappropriate...I see second graders sitting at a desk and their desks are spread out and working individually, I just think about how much more could they be doing if they were interacting with each other.

The agenda in the classroom moves toward a rigid, planned curriculum, which at times may be scripted and comes in a box and is handed to the teacher (Gammage, 2006; Thirumurthy, Szecsi, Hardin, & Koo, 2007; Woodrow, 2007). As teachers are required

or choose to embrace this more rigid way of engaging children in the early childhood classroom, the child's voice is moved further and further away from being heard.

There are teachers who are actively fighting against this form of silence in the classroom, but this study portrays the potential struggles they will face if they try to reject the boxed curriculum in favor of more authentic forms of learning such as a project approach. These teachers face a hard fight to keep their classroom rid of the more formalized instruction or boxed curriculum. The fear is that children will start to embrace their loss of voice in the school and will not attempt to critically think about school or learning. Learning is a very natural act for a child. To alter this form of natural inquisition would be at best a tragedy.

The silencing of children is prevalent in public elementary schools. The teachers from this study said children are asked to be silent as they move about the school as well as the classroom. This more disciplined view of children moving about the school is in line with the ways Foucault (1995) described docile bodies, and the connection between our prisons and schools. As teachers continue to advocate for more natural and developmentally appropriate ways of being in the school, children for the time being are experiencing a very controlling school environment.

### **Negative Impact**

One negative impact of our current accountability movement is that outside time is limited, which limits physical development. Also, cognitive and emotional development is being controlled, hindering critical thinking. And finally, there is a social component. Dr. Ginsburg and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) came out with a report in 2007 stating that play is essential to a young child's development.

Ginsburg (2007) stated, “Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development” (p. 183). This acknowledgement by the American Academy of Pediatrics supports the early childhood teacher efforts to ensure that best practices for young children are used at school. Students being silenced in school hinders their ability to navigate relationships with peers and teachers. These profound negative effects happening to children today may not be recognized until they are young adults, when their abilities to make a positive impact on the world have been greatly limited and may even be expressed in negative ways.

Children should be encouraged to make decisions not only about the curriculum and the direction of learning in the classroom but also the ways they solve problems and engage with others. This form of mutual respect and conflict resolution was shown to be a sore subject with the administrators discussed in this study. Administrators were pushing for a more black-and-white form of discipline, while the early childhood teachers were pushing for more authentic ways to engage with children in an effort to enhance a guidance component within the classroom. Administrators do not support peace tables, encouraging students to talk it out, and teachers sitting with students and modeling words that might work in a conflict resolution situation. All of these situations help encourage the child and work to make the child feel competent to face the world and know they are capable and able to solve problems.

As Alfie Kohn (2011) stated in his book *Feel-Bad Education*, “it’s not what we teach; it’s what they learn” (p. 67). So what are the children in early childhood learning? To wait for the teacher to direct their problem solving, which teaches the child that there

are powers at work to control their behaviors. Without the ability to work out their own problems, the child is likely to develop a defeatist or victim mentality. The children feel like victims to the rules of the classroom and start to view life as being fair or unfair. This black-and-white view of the world creates a very defeatist perception when things are not going well. If children start to see the world in such a way when they encounter problems, this could affect their resiliency to the world. The world is often gray, not black and white. The gray areas allow for critical thinking and reflection to make decisions and determine the best course of action. Many of the teachers in the study talked of fighting to make children understand this world of gray where they are the ones who will need to make and defend their decisions.

### **Loss of Creativity**

This study supported research that highlights one of the most devastating parts of our current accountability movement, the loss of creativity (Ray & Smith, 2010; Thirumurthy, et. al., 2007). The one right answer on the test does not allow for creativity and being able to creatively express your point of view. What would the world be like if our standardized tests were created to value the creativity of individuals versus the ability to spit back information? What would that world look like? Our current early childhood classrooms are full of creativity, but that creativity can be expressed only if the early childhood teacher values creativity and individual expression. The early childhood teacher was the key component in fostering creativity in the classroom. Even in pre-kindergarten, students are now being subjected to a more rigid literacy and math outlined curriculum. Now, as they begin school, our children are learning that their interpretation

or views of the world are not important. They are not being seen as unique individuals. As Paige pointed out, it is the taming of the masses, or the herding of the cows.

Any time our schools start to embrace a more singular interpretation of the curriculum is a time to worry. The single interpretation of the curriculum is being purchased for thousands and thousands of dollars from textbook publishers. Creative expression is being stomped out by time on task. The loss of creative expression is the loss of human potential. The students are not able to grow and develop to their potential because only one aspect of development is being addressed in a way that may or may not meet their needs as a creative individual.

### **Oppression – Losing the “art” of teaching**

When asked why they get up each morning and go to work, the participants of this study described many references to the children and to the relationships within the teaching profession. In this study, this type of engagement was referred to as the “art” of teaching. As Alexander (2005) so eloquently stated, “To take seriously the image of teaching and education as fine arts, then we must understand how they are nondiscursive expression to capture and communicate the shape of human feeling” (p. 54). This view is profoundly revealing about the world of the early childhood teacher. As an artist engages in painting a picture, the early childhood teacher engages children to spark their curiosities about the world. Teachers impart knowledge that each day will not be like any other day in an early childhood classroom, but will be unique and exciting. In many of the classrooms described, the teacher has made a commitment to teach in a more developmentally appropriate way and keep the massive movement of accountability at bay. This “art” of teaching was described as the ability to “be with children” in such a



way that they are honored and their creative views about the world are respected. It is the ability to know when a teachable moment is happening and be flexible enough to embrace it, regardless of whether it veers from the day's plan. This "art" of teaching will not be allowed if the push down of curriculum continues and if the rigorous demands of the curriculum and the interpretation of the early childhood classroom persist. As Goldstein (2007) warned, "...kindergarten is at risk" (p. 378). The teachers in this study were leaders in their field. They are strong teachers who have very defined ways of being with children and of teaching. It would be a tragic reflection of our more robotic ways of living if the art of teaching moves out of the early childhood classroom.

### **Marginalization**

The image of the early childhood teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006) without decision making power in the classroom appeared throughout this study. This marginalization of early childhood teachers has altered ways they incorporate parents, determine curriculum and methods of assessment, and engage with children. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006) warned of the troubling images of teachers in this time. Without critically analyzing the image of teachers and their role in the classroom, all the decision making continues to be stripped away. As Russell (2011) found:

educators are embedded in a cultural environment where ideas are publicly framed and debated, shaping parental expectations, policymakers' rulemaking, and perhaps educators' beliefs about what constitutes legitimate professional practices (p. 259).

Teachers from this study were found, through the data collection, to be embedded in the current mandates pushing toward marginalizing their role in the classroom. This study

showed many examples of teacher resistance or “bucking the system,” (Paige) and working to carve out pieces of decision making in their classrooms. These ways of “bucking the system” (Paige) are most of the time not embraced by “the big wigs” (Jaime) who control the classroom and the rules of the school. This marginalization creates real hegemony issues for the early childhood teacher.

Hegemony issues make the teacher begin to question what they are doing on a daily basis. Teachers in this study questioned their ability to deliver the more rigid academic curriculum. By losing their decision making capabilities, teacher confidence slips, which creates an unstable professional identity. This loss of power leads to questioning one’s ability to teach because adhering to mandated curriculum can feel very unnatural. It is important to note that all of the teachers in this study said they were not for watering down what early childhood students learn, but instead were for embracing the children and making them the focus of the curriculum.

### **Advocacy**

Many different veins of advocacy appear in this study. The first type of advocacy was silent advocacy. The teacher took the approach to shut the door and “teach on!” (Autumn) This type of advocacy allows the teacher to continue to work within the classroom community in ways that support how she feels are best practices for students. This silent way of supporting the needs and developmentally appropriate practices for children does not bring other colleagues, parents, or administration in to her struggles with mandates or required practices. She simply works with students behind closed doors.

The second type of advocacy would be considered evolving. This is best described as teachers who follow the rules as much as possible, incorporating all the different mandated facets of the curriculum, but then stretches the boundaries to allow for their views of best practices. This type of advocacy will challenge the persons in power if the requirements hit spaces that are considered non-negotiable for the teachers. In this study, those non-negotiable spaces were outside play, and having free choice centers and parent involvement in the classroom. The teachers whom I would classify as evolving advocates challenged the administration when the issue infringed on the non-negotiable best practices. These teachers also challenged their colleagues when free choice centers were questioned or when use of parents in the classroom was challenged. In some instances they will revert to the close your door and “teach on!” (Autumn) method, or in other instances they will move up and more actively advocate for children by setting up meetings with administrators to try to share their research concerning non-negotiable best practices for children.

The third type of advocacy was a fully active advocate. This type of teacher has a fully developed sense of what is best for children and what developmentally appropriate practices are. These teachers speak out to colleagues, administrators, and parents in an effort to share their views on the world and hopefully evoke change within these people. They know what is best for children and are willing to wage their jobs on the fact that they will teach within those boundaries. They reject any practices that force them to move out of their best practices format within the classroom. These teachers may conform to school rules in the hallways or out on the playground in order to keep the

peace in these shared spaces, but they relentlessly work to educate others about developmentally appropriate practices.

These three different types of advocacy were highly visible within this study and illustrate how teachers are working to push against the boundaries in the school environment. They are incessantly working in the best interests of the children and trying to keep the voice of the child present in their classrooms. This honoring of children and mutual respect of children creates a solid foundation for the future of each child.

### **Identity**

As previously described, identity throughout this study was in line with Assaf's (2008) ideas as being socially and culturally created and multifaceted, including a "unique blend of personal beliefs, dispositions, practical knowledge, and educational theories of teaching mediated by an on-going process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences" (p. 240). There were a few parts of the early childhood teacher identity which stood out within this study. I recognize the complexity of identity work and realize I have done nothing more than scratch the surface in taking a closer look at the early childhood teacher. I found identity work in terms of advocacy for children, place in the school, and being an early childhood teacher. All these identity labels were present in this study.

In terms of advocacy, I believe that the teachers from this study embraced their views of their job and their role in the lives of children as it is a calling or something that they are meant to do. With this viewpoint, there is a sense of urgency to act upon what they know is best for children. Through their stories of working after hours and on weekends, even though this was uncomfortable at times due to the guilt of leaving their

family, the teacher felt this sense of being prepared and being there for the children. The teachers explained that the children needed them to advocate for best practices in order for them to grow and develop in the classroom. This advocacy for the child is essential to the identity work present in this study.

A surprise of this study was the need for the early childhood teacher to be accepted or feel a part of their group of colleagues. This expression of needing to feel a part of a team of teachers was not something I thought I would find in this study. In many instances this study showed how early childhood teachers are pushing against the boundaries of the school and the curriculum and testing mandates. But even when colleagues do not hold the same teaching philosophies, the participants of this study shared their longing to be a part of the group and gain respect and acceptance.

The final identity work that was identified in the study was the teacher's identification as an early childhood teacher. Many times the teachers shared their pride in being early childhood teachers and their acknowledgement that they are a little bit different than other teachers. Jaime even shared her struggles with leaving teaching and the loss of the label that she had identified with for so many years. How hard it is to not be able to say, "I am an early childhood teacher." This feeling of loss or the sense that a part of your life has been taken away is difficult. The title, early childhood teacher, was a loaded label for the teachers in this study. Many of them described the differences between being an early childhood teacher versus and elementary teacher. One of the main differences was "being with children" (Paige) and embracing the teachable moment. The teachers in this study found that the teachable moment was when they were willing to embrace ideas that were not always a part of the lesson plan.

## **Red Flags**

After reviewing the various ideas that emerged from the data, I started to see all the red flags that were right in front of me. The three red flags most prominent within this study were: unstable foundation for children, total disconnect, and leaving the profession. The red flags were consequences of the themes that arose from the data. These consequences were present within each of the themes and were vivid when reading through the data.

### **Unstable Foundation**

It seems fitting to start with the red flag that describes the consequences to children. If the state of early childhood teaching continues to move down a rigid accountability path, then young children will continue to be at risk. These risks include not gaining developmentally appropriate skills, being labeled as special needs, and most importantly, loss of human potential.

Early childhood teachers in this study spoke of the stress and the amount of time that testing currently takes in their classrooms. This takes away from child-directed learning in the classroom. Children need to have problem solving and trial and error experiences to build a foundation of learning (Branscombe et. al, 2003; Saracho, 2012). If one embraces the view that children learn from a hands-on approach to the world, then the push for more pencil-paper accountability moves away from the goal of early childhood education. The project-based or more hands-on learning-based curriculum has the child at the center of all experiences. The pencil-paper, test-preparation curriculum is looking for the child to mimic information in an effort to pass a test. This does not build a foundation for the child's learning future.

If the view of constructing knowledge is embraced, then the way to construct knowledge is to have rich experiences. It is very hard to make the argument that pencil-paper experiences will give the same rich experiences as students being able to move, explore, create, and experiment with the world around them. The social and emotional development of students is another vital area during the early childhood years. With a more isolated view of learning, the children are not allowed to move about and have social experiences with their peers. The current movement to have the teacher follow a pre-prescribed curriculum does not allow for the impromptu learning experiences that arise when students are allowed to engage each other socially and emotionally.

Another area that I was surprised to find at the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten level was the devaluing of play. I did not think that I would find these classrooms to be without free choice centers. The devaluing of children's play as a form of learning was vivid throughout the study. The teachers from this study did push against this rule and found ways to incorporate the different centers such as dramatic play, science, writing, creative art, etc., but acknowledged that they were unique in this endeavor within their schools. The new term, "learning stations," in many cases has replaced the more free style learning centers. Learning stations have predesigned activities that have an objective for one or two students. In this study the focus tended to be literacy. But the embracing of learning stations means the turning away from free choice centers. Learning stations are seen as more rigorous with a learning objective. This supports the idea that rigor means teacher directed, moving away from free choice, child-directed play. This is a red flag for early childhood educators who believe that child's play is the foundation of their learning. The removal of this form of engagement with the world

around them will alter the ways they learn in school. The foundation of the learning experiences will be changed forever.

### **Total Disconnect**

There was a distinct disconnect between what the administration and public policy makers see happening in schools based on numbers versus what is actually taking place in schools. This is an urgent matter for the early childhood teacher. As stated previously, the foundation for learning is being altered for early childhood students, so there is a total disconnect between what are best practices for children and what is being required from the early childhood teachers. This research uncovered many different instances of the total disconnect between the rule makers and the early childhood teacher in knowing what are best practices for young children, such as materials needed, how the children move within the school, developmentally appropriate practices for children, and the ability of the early childhood teacher to make professional decisions based on what they know to be best for the children in their classroom. This total disconnect is extremely damaging for early childhood students and early childhood teachers.

In this study, teachers gave many examples of how they are perceived by the decision makers in the school. The teachers shared how they are perceived as not “teaching” the children the required materials, as needing coaching in order to be an effective teacher, and as being unable to effectively manage a classroom. All of these examples illustrate the total disconnect for what is happening every day in the early childhood classroom. Without a deeper understanding of the early childhood teacher and child, the mandates placed in these areas will not be realistic and will definitely be damaging for the students and teachers.



## **Leaving the Profession**

This study had six participants and one researcher who all shared life stories concerning their views as teachers. Of the six participants and one researcher, two have left teaching and one has thought about leaving teaching. This is a clear message concerning the stress and struggles that are a part of the early childhood teacher's life. If an early childhood teacher identifies strongly with the role of being a teacher, yet is willing to leave the field of teaching due to the stress and struggles, this is a wake-up call. We are losing very important teachers every day who could provide our children with the best education.

When we think of the current state of teaching in America, there are many opinions about how the teacher is failing the students. This study found, through the voices of the teachers, that teachers were not failing the students but were fighting each day to provide the best learning environment for the students and at times going against the rules of the school to do so. But with any fight, there is a time that the fight becomes overwhelming or not worth the effort. For one of the teachers in this study, the fight became too much. And the alternative was to leave teaching and pursue other career options. Wagner and French (2010) found that one aspect of what keeps teachers teaching is the degree of work satisfaction, including their ability to have control over decision making and creative freedom in the classroom. With this in mind, participants from this study are tempted to quit their jobs as a result of loss of decision making and creative freedom in their work.

Friedman (2000) conducted a study on burnout in teachers. He found that burnout was related to the stress a teacher felt in connection to goals for teaching as well as

relationships with colleagues and administration. Jaime left teaching and could be considered a victim of burnout, but it appears to be much more complex an issue. Jaime seems to enjoy working with children and does not seem to mind the current administration on a personal level. It is the administrative policies and procedures that are creating so much stress for Jaime that she is willing to have a career change in the middle of the school year.

This study uncovered the stress and struggles that early childhood teachers are facing each day. This continual push-and-pull effect was having a negative impact on the teacher, forcing teachers to leave the field. This is a huge red flag - to lose highly qualified teachers because the working conditions are so stressful is a tragedy. Most teachers would agree that money is not the motivation for their profession. If the reward and benefit of teaching is engaging children in a learning experience, but the requirements of teaching are so extreme that the profession becomes not worth it, what will become of the children? Will this leave the field of teaching with under-qualified teachers? And how will that affect the future of children? These questions are pressing and need to gain the attention if we are to retain our most qualified teachers who are fleeing the profession.

### **Summary**

As I engaged in praxis with the themes from Chapter Four, there were lingering voices hidden within each theme. By exposing the underlying oppression, red flags, and voice of children, this research moves in the direction of needed reflection and action for the sake of teaching as a profession and the future of children. Early childhood teachers are at risk, through the exposure of marginalization of teachers, identity crisis, and the

continual need to advocate in the work place. With the early childhood teacher in crisis, young children are negatively impacted. The main red flags to note from this study are the unstable foundations with which children are beginning their lives, the total disconnect between policies and best practices for children, and the early childhood teacher fleeing the field. This is a warning for the future of children.

### **Answering the Hard Questions**

Answering, what it means to be an early childhood teacher in today's educational climate is not only taxing but virtually impossible. Nonetheless, it is important to continue the search. As one focuses on the early childhood teacher, it is important to note the social/cultural time and place in history, making the feat even more difficult. In an effort to get close to the essence of the early childhood teacher, I found that the actual voice of the teacher was a starting point. The voices of six early childhood teachers and one past early childhood teacher/current researcher alluded to the current state of identity crisis for early childhood teachers. This study exposed a view of the early childhood teacher as undervalued, deskilled, and misunderstood by others, including administrators, some colleagues, and rule makers. With this current state of teaching, there is a risk of early childhood teachers leaving the profession and placing early childhood children at risk of not receiving the needed guidance from an educated, professional teacher. Both the early childhood teacher and children are currently not meeting their human potential due to the confining restrictions on the teaching and learning environment.

In this study, early childhood teachers were found to be resisting the current teaching restrictions in an effort to keep early childhood education as developmentally appropriate as possible. But with this struggle comes an impact on the personal life of

the early childhood teacher. The balance between a stressful work environment and home life was exhausting for these early childhood teachers. The final implication from this study is that early childhood teachers continue to place the developmental concerns of the young child at the forefront of their decision making in the classroom. This is our wake up call to create change and continue to advocate for what we know to be best for early childhood teachers and students. Hope comes in the form of change and glimpses of future possibilities.

### **Sub-Question #1**

As the study moved through the exploration of the early childhood teacher, a sub-question was explored: how do early childhood teachers feel about the current state of their teaching? Each one of the participants of the study used young children as a central focal point for their descriptions of teaching. With this compass as a guide, the state of teaching was described as not only hopeful but also a continual struggle. There was a sense of hope in terms of how the teachers discussed the teachable moments in their classrooms, being with children, and relationships with children and their families. On the other hand, there was this sense of a continual struggle to keep the early childhood student's learning environment and curriculum developmentally appropriate. This feeling of stress and struggle was present in all the conversations, supporting the view that the early childhood teacher is in a current crisis state in terms of identity and teaching.

### **Sub-Question #2**

Any teacher would tell you that decision making in the classroom allows teachers to hone their craft and maneuver the journey of questioning and learning. The second

sub-question for this study was: what drives the decision making process of the early childhood teacher in today's political climate? The decision-making process for the early childhood teachers in this study was driven by their degree of advocacy for the young child. Some teachers were willing to risk it all on their views of what is appropriate for children. While others are not willing to risk it all but are willing to "buck the system" in order to create change for areas of their profession that they feel are non-negotiable. And then some participants were not willing to voice their concerns or challenge others but would shut their classroom doors and do what was best for children in their professional views. I found that all of the participants of this study exhibited some degree of advocacy. However, there might be teachers who do not advocate for children at all and rely on the mandated curriculum or colleagues to guide their decision making in the classroom. This was not what I found in this study. Advocacy was ever present with a varying degree of implementation of the required curriculum.

### **Sub-Question #3**

The final sub-question of the study was: how do teachers' stories reflect the effects of decreased teacher decision making on students? With the decrease in decision making in the classroom comes the deskilling of the early childhood teacher, which in turn leads to teacher marginalization and the risk of teachers leaving the profession. The early childhood teacher is a vital part of the early childhood classroom who makes a difference in supporting the growth and development of young children.

The early childhood teachers in this study shared their life stories concerning how each student's needs are varied and need to be addressed in a unique manner. Taking away the teacher's decision making therefore leads to students being taught the same

material at the same time in the classroom, decrease in free choice play, decrease in developmentally appropriate materials, and decrease in fostering student autonomy. All of this leads to the loss of human potential in the classroom. This is deeply troubling and needs to be altered for the sake of children.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I acknowledge that this study only scratches the surface of the potential professional identity research with early childhood teachers. There are multiple plausible studies that could be done, but I pondered the following areas during my analysis of this study's data: How do administrators perceive early childhood teachers within the public school setting? How do early childhood teachers in other parts of the United States alter their classrooms in response to public school mandates? What effect does being an early childhood teacher have on one's health? This research study could be a spring board for future studies in all these areas. The early childhood teacher is a vital part of the school and therefore needs to be a vital part of future research that will continue the search for the essence of the early childhood teacher.

### **Reflections: Continuing the Search**

As described in chapter three, with any phenomenological study, there really is not a way to truly find the essence (van Manen, 1990) for all time. So with this in mind, I continue to reflect and spiral along the journey to examine and reexamine what it means to be an early childhood teacher. The most important point I garnered from this study was that the voice of teachers of young children are a vital part of the continuing, complex conversation about the early childhood teacher. The early childhood teacher is at risk in our current academic climate, which in turn affects young children, which in

turn affects the nation's educational system and the nation itself. As an early childhood teacher, my view is that professionals in this field must reclaim our power and voice, not only for ourselves but also for the future of early childhood students.

### *Researcher Reflection*

*What does it mean to teach early childhood students? This is a very different form of teaching. I was drawn to teaching the youngest students because I felt this was where I could make the biggest difference. I could touch the lives of the youngest students and give them a strong foundation that they could carry with them throughout their learning path. But how do I define what happens in the classroom? For me it was a negotiation between me and the child. I would look for different glimpses into the interests and needs of the children and seize these moments in an effort to create learning connections. These learning connections would spiral and create more questions which would lead us into fruitful areas. Along the journey, we had times of tension from what children know about a topic and what they were trying to adapt into their web of understanding. These experiences produced teachable moments that supported their new understanding or learning. Of course in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, a large part of supporting learning is supporting the social and emotional child. This was very important to building a sturdy foundation for the future. When a child was making a mistake with others, this was the best time to gently guide them toward making decisions for themselves and to problem solve. This was all in an effort to support child autonomy. Child and teacher autonomy are needed in the classroom as a means to honor the work of the early childhood teacher. This work is essential in the lives of children.*

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview #1 Questions

- 1 – Tell me about where you attended college when you were working on your education courses.
- 2 – In your education courses, what do you remember about best practices (big ideas) for teaching early childhood students?
- 3 – Tell me about your first day you taught students as a certified teacher.
- 4 – Tell me about your current teaching situation.
- 5 – Tell me how you organize your teaching day.
- 6 – If there was one thing that you could change about your classroom what would it be?
- 7 – If there was one thing that you feel most proud of as a teacher what is it?
- 8 – Tell me about your views on assessment in your classroom?
- 9 – Tell me your views concerning the local/state/national testing?

## Interview #2 Questions

- 1 – What do you feel are the most important characteristics of an early childhood teacher?
- 2 – Tell me how you would describe your current teaching experience in a way that would give outsiders a glimpse into your work load as a teacher?
- 3 – How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
- 4 – Tell me about a time when you have experienced a struggle between your teaching philosophy and requirements of your job as a teacher.
  - 4a – What created this struggle within you?
  - 4b – How do you feel your students are affected by struggles such as your example?
- 5 – What is the most influential idea/theories/theory about teaching young children that drives your decision making in the classroom?
- 6 – Can you think of a story that demonstrates your decision making process in the classroom?
- 7 – Tell me about a time when you felt you made a difference in the life of a student?
- 8 – From the time you began teaching to the present, tell me about how things have changed in early childhood education?
- 9 – How have these changes affected early childhood students?
- 10 – Can you think of a time when you have felt discouraged by required changes in your school district?
- 11 – Can you think of a time when (one of the changes) has affected a student in your classroom?
- 12 – How do you feel about the current state of teaching?

## Appendix B

### Protocol Writing Prompt #1

Find a calm and relaxing space to write. Make sure that you feel comfortable and that you are able to take an hour to focus on your response(s) to the following prompts. Your life stories are yours to share without right or wrong answers. Try to embrace each experience and write about it as you are there again.

Envision a time when you found yourself having to defend or protect what you know is best for early childhood children. Describe this experience including the following.

- Describe the space in detail – what is the layout of the space? what are on the walls?  
Any furniture/equipment – how is it arranged? Who is present? What do you see?
- What does it feel like to enter the space?
- What do you smell?
- Do you have feelings during this time? What are your feelings?
- Can you hear sounds? What sounds do you hear?
- What is happening in the space?
- How did the experience affect or did the experience affect your students?
- Write about a time including how/if this experience has changed you as an early childhood teacher.

Feel free to write any other memories or thoughts about this experience.

## Protocol Writing Prompt #2

Find a calm and relaxing space to write. Make sure that you feel comfortable and that you are able to take an hour to focus on your response(s) to the following prompts. Your life stories are yours to share without right or wrong answers. Try to embrace each experience and write about it as you are there again.

Envision what a perfect school day would look like if there were not constraints or expectations placed on the day by the teacher or school. This perfect day will have all children ready to learn without the presence of behavior issues.

Please pick pre-kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to create this perfect day....

- Describe the space in detail – what is the layout of the space? what are on the walls?  
Any furniture/equipment – how is it arranged? Who is present? What do you see?
- What does it feel like to enter the space?
- What do you smell?
- Do you have feelings during this time? What are your feelings?
- Can you hear sounds? What sounds do you hear?
- What is happening in the space?
- How did the experience affect or did the experience affect your students?
- Write about this time including how/if this experience has changed you as an early childhood teacher.

Feel free to write any other memories or thoughts about this experience.

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Questions

- Introductions – have each teacher share their name, current grade teaching, grades that they have taught in years past, and years teaching experience.
- For the purpose of this focus group, we will take turns talking in order to hear what each person has to say and be respectful of their perspectives. Remind teachers that they may agree or disagree but we will state our opinions respectfully and respond to others respectfully.
- Each person will have a turn to speak after each question so that all the voices within the room can be heard.

#### Questions:

1 – Tell me about what motivates you to wake up each day and go to your job as an early childhood teacher.

2 – How would you describe yourself as an early childhood teacher?

3 – Can you think of a time that you felt hopeful as an early childhood teacher?

4 – What are the differences between early childhood teachers and elementary teachers?

5 – Can you tell me something that you are very passionate about as a teacher?

6 – Tell me about your favorite teaching moment or your Oscar moment in teaching.

7 – In the interviews the phrase “being with children” was used. Tell me what this phrase means to you.

8 – Tell me about the three most important things you want children to learn during their time in your classroom.

9 – Tell me about how you include parents or other members of the community in your classroom.

10 – Tell me about how you develop a sense of classroom community.

## Appendix D

### Emerging Themes

#### Characteristics of Early Childhood Teachers

Teaching chooses you – it is a part of who you are

Value the whole child

Nurturing – nurturing spirit / Caring / Compassion / Flexibility / Considerate /

Purposeful / Open-mindedness / Kind / Patience

Facilitator of learning / Teaching is an opportunity

Time – spend personal time and vacation time working

Reflective / Learn with the children

#### Classroom environment

#### Inequity of the other classrooms

Day job 8 – 3

#### Being with Children

Teachable moment – acting in the moment – capturing the moment

Intentions of teaching

Honor children – ideas, thoughts, feelings / Listen to children

Go with the child's flow of interest/intrigue / Don't have to stick to plan of the

day

#### Advocacy

See individual students not just the masses – herding the cows

#### Conflict Resolution

#### Time

Cram in the curriculum

Get to the structures of school – interrupts the flow of the day

Eliminate centers due to time – school district doesn't say you can't use centers  
but the requirements are so vast there is not time

#### Teaching more than just to the test

Recess – honor the whole child

#### Children Have Not Changed!

Push Down – prek is what k used to be etc.

Trying to achieve the impossible / Creating disabilities by making students feel not  
capable

Practical Early childhood – life skills, basic needs,

#### Peer Validation

Requirements – Lack of Autonomy

College – hands-on – constructivism

Lack of EC understanding from administration – promotes leaving field?

#### Advocacy

Bucking system / Lose faith in system / Add centers in first grade

#### National Board Certification

Promotes reflective teaching / Gave teachers permission to get rid of “fluff” without  
feeling bad / Helps value time with kids as more precious

#### Curriculum



Money machine  
 Not Consistent with programs – bring in one program then gone next year  
 Teacher have to use their own money to create DA  
 Loss of teacher control / Not DA – try push reading into pre-k  
 Developmentally Appropriate Practices  
 Play  
     Hand-on / Fun / Thematic / Student choice / Not able to do this because of time  
 Teacher Autonomy  
     Create lessons / Portfolios / Collaboration has lessened  
     Feeling unsure due to pressures/requirements  
     Emotional affect of how see themselves as teachers / Taking away the power  
     Trust issues with teachers – don't trust them to be able to discipline?  
 Bond Money used for things other than EC  
 Lack of Materials – due to lack of EC understanding  
 Stress on Family and personal body  
     Exhaustion – physically, emotionally, and mentally / No time to go to restroom during school day / Loss of time with family  
     Emotional strain – guilt – not being there – not being a good wife/mother  
         \*don't want family to think school is more important than them...  
     Lack of understanding from husband/significant others  
 Parent involvement needed to help support teachers efforts  
 Sense of Community  
 Relationships with colleagues  
 Relationships with children / Individualize needs of students  
 Relationships with parents  
 Testing  
     Stressful for students and teachers / Feelings / Consequences / No value  
     Documentation machines not working – room for error  
 Affects the classroom community disruptions / Unsupervised students while gathering testing data  
     Teachers abandoned / Student resistance  
 Reflective teachers  
     Flow of day / Student ownership of classroom / Independence  
     Portfolios work samples – adding to required assessment pieces  
 School controls students  
 Parents not welcome  
 Love Job  
 Administrative control / Teacher confidence  
 Consequences of students  
 Emotional connection to students / Acts of kindness / Mutual respect  
 Administration permission to deviate  
 Money  
 Devaluing of Teachers  
     Parents think we are day care / Lose money applied to national board

## Appendix E

### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Wednesday, January 18, 2012  
IRB Application No ED11212  
Proposal Title: The Early Childhood Teacher: Navigating professional Identities During a Time of Increased Accountability  
Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 1/17/2013**

Principal

Investigator(s):

Sherry Lynn Been  
9807 E. 119th St. S.  
Bixby, OK 74008

Kathryn Castle  
235 Willard  
Stillwater, OK 74078

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Shelia Kennison, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Sherry Lynn Dallis Been

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER:  
NAVIGATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES  
DURING A TIME OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

Major Field: Education, Curriculum Studies

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Education at University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma in May 1997.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Education at University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma in 1996.

Experience:

2009-2012 Graduate Assistant for Elementary Education at OSU-Tulsa

1997-2003 Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teacher – Bartlesville, Claremore, and Tulsa Public Schools

2000-2011 Adult Educator - Tulsa Technology Center

2004-2011 Shining Through Learning Center - preschool administrator

Professional Memberships:

Member: Phi Delta Kappa and Golden Key International

Member: National Association for the Education of Young Children  
(NAEYC/SECA/ECAO/TECA)

Member: National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators  
(NAECTE/OAECTE)

Name: Sherry Lynn Dallis Been

Date of Degree: July, 2012

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER:  
NAVIGATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES  
DURING A TIME OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

Pages in Study: 132

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Education, Curriculum Studies

Scope and Method of Study:

The focus of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine early childhood teacher professional identity and answer the main question, what does it mean to be an early childhood teacher in today's educational climate. The six research participants, early childhood teachers with five or more years teaching experience, worked within Midwest urban or surrounding suburban settings and were all pre-kindergarten or kindergarten teachers. Data collected through two semi-structured interviews, protocol writing, a focus group, and autobiographical writing were used to identify themes through selective highlighting (van Manen, 1990). This study focused on a complex understanding of professional identity formation, keeping in mind that identities are "multi-faceted" (Alsup, 2006), and are "socially and culturally" (Swennen, Volman, & van Essen, 2008) constructed by lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) throughout teachers' lives.

Findings and Conclusions:

The themes that emerged included the theme of teachable moments: "when that bird flies in," advocacy: "bucking the system," relationships: "every walk of life is at our school," and stress and struggles: "wreaking havoc on the structure of the classroom." These themes add to the complicated conversation of the early childhood teacher. Diving into the themes exposed the underlying voice of children, oppression of the early childhood teacher, the risk of losing the art of teaching, and red flags for the future of the early childhood teacher and young children.

Early childhood teachers are being negatively affected by the deskilling and undervaluing of the profession as a whole. A direct line of influence is the early childhood teachers' impact on the lives of young children. The current state of early childhood education illuminates reasons to pause and reflectively engage in the complicated conversation concerning the early childhood teacher, for the future of young children.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Kathryn Castle

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