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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PUBLIC PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

Public preschools are rapidly being added to elementary schools throughout the nation. A literature review showed high-quality preschools both improve the lives of at-risk children and have several commonalities centered on children's and teachers' experiences. Yet, there has been little inquiry regarding teachers' experiences. This phenomenological study researched preschool teachers' professional lives. Interviews were conducted with six public preschool teachers from inner city schools. A survey and written communication from administrators and teachers were also collected. Several themes emerged centered around the purposes of public preschool and the public preschool teacher's role. Findings indicated that pre-k is viewed as a means to help at-risk children. Teachers feel pressure to teach in ways that produce "readiness" in children and find working with English language learners particularly challenging. Further study is needed to determine what types of support for pre-k teachers would be most helpful.

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CHAPTER I: The Research Problem

Preschool education is a thread woven through the quilt of our nation's educational system for young children (Bloch, Seward, & Seidlinger, 1989). Three- and four-year-old children, referred to as "preschoolers" by those in the early childhood field, may participate in a number of settings that constitute preschool education, including child care centers and private nursery schools. The current trend is to offer preschool education for four-year-olds in the public schools, with some classrooms also allowing three-year-olds to attend. According to the National Household Education Survey, in 1996, 46 % of three-year-olds and 69 % of four-year-olds were reported as having been enrolled in preschool classrooms nationwide (Wirt, 1999). Although the data do not separate children who are attending public preschools from those attending private preschools, in 2002, 46 states invested funds in some kind of state prekindergarten initiative, with publicpreschool classrooms accounting for most of the growth in enrollment (Blank, Franck, James, & Rice, 2002).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, reasons cited for adding classes for three- and four-year-olds to public schools included an equitable start for low-income children and a reduction in costs to society by preventing problems before they begin (Bloch, et al., 1989). Additional reasons have recently emerged for including classrooms for preschoolers as a part of public schooling, and generally fall into three categories: (a) a response to the pressure for children to learn and to be

"prepared," (b) a way for the public schools to provide more comprehensive services for families in poverty, and (c) additional revenue for the schools.

One real force behind the state-funded prekindergarten movement is the belief that providing high-quality preschool services to children will increase the number of students who come to school "ready to learn" (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001), an important issue for the public schools in light of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002). Furthermore, publicity over recent brain research and acknowledgement that early childhood education sets the stage for later learning has increased the public schools' desire for participation in preschool. Other reasons given include the feeling that starting at age five is too late, and that preschool education is equally as worthy of public support as K-12 education (Committee for Economic Development, 2002). Also, the inadequate availability of social services, particularly for families of low or modest incomes, encourages the public schools in areas of high poverty to bring together support from different entities, such as food and housing assistance, for families of young children (Jacobson, 2002).

Another reason for adding preschool to the public school centers on the expanded need for high-quality child care and preschool programs (Olson, 2002). Public schools have discovered that they can bring in additional revenue when parents pay schools for before and after school child care. Also, because most pre-k programs are one-half day in length, the schools benefit financially by providing child care for the part of the day the child is not in class. Finally, because pre-k

classrooms in several states are funded in the same way as other classrooms, it is in a school's best interest to add the program, because the schools can make additional money as they add enrollment (Franck, 2002).

Due to the increase in public preschool classrooms, many early childhood teachers are being hired to teach pre-k. Yet, there is a void in the research concerning this group of educators. The existing literature does include research regarding new teachers' experiences, such as the recent interview-based study conducted by Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, and Peske (2002). They found many new teachers leaving the profession soon after they had begun due to "…the overwhelming nature of the work and the pain of failing in the classroom" (2002, p. 273). Another qualitative study was conducted by Wien (1995), in which she explored the work of five early childhood teachers, each in a different child care center. Through these case studies, Wien developed arguments to help explain why developmentally appropriate practices are hard to implement in early childhood settings.

Notwithstanding these examples, research about preschool education has been predominantly quantitative in nature and focused on child outcomes (e.g. Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). But research does allude to the importance of considering the public preschool teacher's experiences. For instance, Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, and Cryer (1997) examined features of child care classrooms that predict process quality. They found having qualified early childhood teachers who are satisfied with their work experiences is

associated with programs providing high-quality early childhood experiences for children. Scarr, Eisenberg, and Deater-Deckard (1994) had similar findings, although the focus of their research was more broadly directed on measuring the quality of child care.

Highly qualified teachers are defined as those who are "highly educated, specially trained to work with young children, well supervised, and actively involved in program planning and evaluation" (National Research Council, 2001, p. 150). Espinosa (2002) recently determined that quality in the classroom is also affected by adequate compensation for teachers and opportunities for their personal and professional growth. In addition, preschool classroom teachers view relationships with other educators as significant to their own professional development and job satisfaction (Porter, 1981; Thompson, 1997).

Although we know that teacher expertise and job satisfaction lead to high quality preschools, we do not know if public preschool teachers are experiencing what they need in order to work at a high level of proficiency. There is a void in early childhood research about the essence of their experiences. Therefore, to research the lived experience of public preschool teachers would be valuable. This study would give public preschool teachers a voice and a chance to enrich the existing early childhood research.

This inquiry's focus is "continually aimed at understanding human experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p.19), particularly to see if preschool teachers are satisfied with their job settings, as well as to learn about their work with young

children. The information gained from the life experiences of public preschool teachers provides glimpses of significant situations and allows ideas concerning their professional experiences to evolve. The findings can also be explored for application to several arenas: (1) The information can enlighten teacher educators, and possibly tell those who work with early childhood teacher candidates how to better prepare them for a variety of roles in which they may find themselves as early childhood teachers; (2) It can inform administrators of the needs of this group of people, helping the administrators and teachers work together to be more successful in an era when pressure is high to "leave no child behind;" (3) The information can help policy makers as they make budget decisions that affect the teachers, the children, and their families.

Research Question

Policymakers say that public schools are faced with three main issues regarding pre-k programs. Those three issues, a lack of facilities, inadequate collaboration with other teachers, and teacher preparation requirements (Blank, et al., 2002), manifest themselves in several ways. In some instances, the preschool programs have space, but do not have appropriate facilities designed for young children. Other times, due to lack of classroom space at the elementary school site, the prekindergarten program may be contracted out to be housed in a child care center, a local Head Start center, or a church nursery school. Not only may this lead to a difficulty in pre-k teachers building relationships with other teachers, but there may be issues related to collaborating with other entities that arise as well.

Another manifestation of the three main issues cited by Blank, Franck, James, and Rice (2002) centers around teacher preparation requirements, which are hotly debated when less qualified teachers are able to obtain an early childhood teaching certificate through alternative certification. The disparity in education level with others who teach the same age group, along with little time to collaborate with other teachers at the elementary school building, may lead to public preschool teachers not feeling included in the participant culture of the elementary school (Bowman, as quoted in Sandham, 2002; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Mitchell, Seligson, & Marx, 1989; Wien, 1995). Instead they may be marginalized and may feel they are not viewed as "real teachers."

In order to improve the quality of preschool classrooms we need to know what public preschool teachers see as major issues in their work. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide an impression of which of these issues are the most salient to the people in the thick of it—those public preschool teachers who are the participant culture. What do they see as the major challenges? Are the three issues identified by policymakers the same issues teachers embrace as important? Do preschool teachers feel marginalized from teachers in grades K-5 and from pre-k teachers at other sites? What lessons can be learned by talking with these people in depth (Creswell, 1998)? In sum, these questions combine to form the research question: What is the lived experience of publiqpreschool teachers?

Summary

To further understand the phenomenon of teaching in a public preschool classroom, an explanation of the study follows, and is divided into five parts: (a) a review of the current literature, (b) the conceptual framework and research design of the phenomenological study, (c) a description of the participants and their schools, (d) an analysis of research findings, and (e) implications of those findings. First, the existing research pertaining to public preschoolsis reviewed. Research literature illuminates issues in which public preschool teachers find themselves. Second, a phenomenological study was selected as the best way to study the lived experiences of public preschool teachers in and out of the classroom. The conceptual framework of the study and the research methodology are articulated. Third, the participants, their educational backgrounds, their classroom practices, and their schools are described. Then, as an in-depth analysis of the research findings was conducted, themes evolved from the study, both for the individual participants and for the group as a whole, and are described. Finally, a discussion of implications from the textural and structural themes which evolved directs the reader to further research needed as well as ways to use what this study has provided.

CHAPTER II: Literature Review

Early childhood research frames and informs a variety of issues in a public preschool teacher's world. In preparation to conduct the phenomenological study, a literature review of professional research surrounding these issues was carried out and is presented for the reader. Cooper identified this type of literature review as integrative, in that it "presents the 'state of knowledge' relevant to a topic and draws conclusions from the many separate studies that are reviewed" (Cooper, as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 112). Cooper (1989) also stated that it is imperative a variety of approaches be used to collect information. Therefore, formal sources, such as articles from peer-reviewed journals and books, provide considerable information related to public preschool teachers for this study. Additionally, a vast amount of information has been compiled from government documents and notes obtained from attendance at professional meetings.

The review will begin with a look at research related to both the benefits and characteristics of high quality preschools. Then, since teacher qualifications and opportunities for professional development have repeatedly been found to be associated with early childhood programs that make a positive difference in children's lives, this research will be illuminated. Next, because the broad concept of curriculum includes beliefs related to developmentally appropriate practices and the high stakes pressure to "get children 'caught up' and 'ready' for kindergarten" (personal communication, public preschool teachers, October, 2003), several studies concerning curriculum will be discussed. Finally, because so much of the rationale

for public school participation in preschool education has focused on children who are considered "at risk," literature concerning these children will be examined.

Benefits of High Quality Early Education

Research indicates that high-quality preschools make a difference in children's lives, particularly for children who are living in poverty. One well-designed longitudinal study, the Perry Preschool Project, examined the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school (Weikart, Deloria, Lawser, & Wiergerink, 1993 [1970]). From 1962-1967, at ages 3 and 4, the subjects were randomly divided into a program group which received a high-quality preschool program and a comparison group which received no preschool program. Numerous positive findings have been reported throughout the years for the group enrolled in preschool (Weber, Foster & Weikart, 1978; Weikart, Bond, & McNeil, 1978). In a recent phase of the study, Schweinhart & Weikart (1997) assessed the effects on participants at 23 years of age. Findings indicated that during their school years children in the treatment group had lower rates of special education placement, grade retention, and dropping out of school, and as adolescents and young adults they were less likely to engage in criminal behavior.

Campbell, et al., (2001) reported similar far-reaching benefits resulting from the Abecedarian Project of North Carolina, another well-controlled and well-known early intervention study which began in the 1970s. The Abecedarian Project started with 112 infants, 57 of whom were randomly assigned to the treatment group and 54 to the comparison group. The treatment group attended child care which included

small class sizes, well-trained and well-compensated teachers, and a strong curriculum, while the comparison group did not attend child care. Other services were also provided for the treatment group including health care and parent education classes. The children participated in the intervention from infancy into the preschool years. The study has followed the treatment and control groups since that time. Analysis of recent data indicated that the participants, who are now young adults, were more likely to perform well on intelligence tests, pursue higher education and delay parenting than those who did not take part in the program.

In 1985, 1,539 young children participated in a federally-funded early childhood study in the Chicago area. The treatment group was comprised of 989 children who attended programs at 25 sites known as Child-Parent Centers. The Child-Parent Centers were high-quality preschools with an added component of assisting parents in being involved in their children's education. A comparison group of 550 children, who matched the treatment group in eligibility for Title I programs and socioeconomic status, were enrolled in existing early childhood programs in five randomly selected schools serving low-income families. The progress of the children was monitored through interviews, surveys, observations, and administrative records during their school-age years. Results indicated long-term effectiveness for the treatment group in contrast to the comparison group (Reynolds, et al., 2001). Similar to the Perry Preschool Project and Abecedarian Project, the children from the treatment group later exhibited less grade retention,

less placement into special education, more high school graduates, and fewer as adolescents and adults who were arrested for criminal behavior.

Similar to the model programs, publicintervention programs have been able to produce meaningful gains in cognitive, social, and emotionaldevelopment in young children during the preschool years (Barnett, 1995, 1998). However, none of the aforementioned programs were overseen by the public schools; instead they were experimental programs of high quality.

Public preschool in the United States has been a topic of educational conversations for quite some time. Until the 1950s, three- and four-year-olds attended kindergarten along with five-year-olds. The past two decades have seen a trend to include three- and four-year-old children in public schooling once again. However, this time the classrooms for children in this age group are called "pre-kindergarten" or "pre-k" rather than including them in kindergarten. Kagan and Zigler (1987) assessed a number of viewpoints concerning the public schools' involvement in formal schooling for four-year-olds. At the time their book was published, public schools were just beginning this recent trend to add preschool programs, and the book's tone indicated some negative views present in the early childhood field of public school sponsorship of programs for the very young. That tone has changed, however, with Zigler and others now stating that if preschool is done well it can be a good thing (Ripple, Gilliam, Chanana & Zigler, 1999).

A large amount of information has recently been published regarding the status of pre-kindergarten across the United States. The focus has primarily been on

reporting what various states are doing in regard to public preschool initiatives. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services (2003) published an overview of public preschools, stating that "…programs meet key indicators of quality," (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2003, p. 2). Conversely, the National Institute for Early Education Research recently published a yearbook that "demonstrates that state preschool programs are failing the nation's children" (Barnett, Robin, Hustedt & Schulman, 2003, p. 4). While experimental preschools have been the target of extensive longitudinal research, pre-k programs operated by public schools have only recently begun receiving the same kind of investigative attention (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002).

For example, Gilliam and Zigler (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of research pertaining to pre-k in 13 states, and found that in spite of the methodological weaknesses in several of the studies, there were statistically significant positive impacts on some aspects of child development in all of the states. The greatest positive effect they found was an effect size of .42 in receptive language at the end of pre-k. Positive effects were also seen in children's development in the cognitive and social domains. Examples of methodological weaknesses were that none of the studies used random assignment and only one evaluation utilized a comparison group that constituted a credible control for selection bias.

Raden and McCabe (2004) published a report giving a summary of issues that have been recently researched concerning public preschool education in the United States. One issue centers on universal pre-k, which is defined as all four-

year-olds in a state or geographic area being eligible to attend public preschool. Universal pre-k does not, however, mean that pre-kindergarten is available to all the children in the state. It currently exists in three states, Georgia, New York and Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia.

In Georgia, in 1998, kindergarten teachers responding to a survey rated 64 percent of former pre-k students as "well prepared" for school. Eighty-three percent of a group of parents responding to a similar survey believed that their children progressed in kindergarten faster as a result of having been enrolled in a pre-k program (Raden, 1999). Other researchers, Henry, Gordon, Henderson and Ponder (2002), conducted a five-year longitudinal study of the universal pre-k in Georgia. The purpose of the study was to determine the "effectiveness in pre-k in preparing four-year-olds to be successful in school" (Henry, et al., 2002, p.2). The researchers followed a random sample of 3,639 children for four years, from kindergarten through the third grade. The findings were drawn from (a) third grade standardized test results, (b) analyses of teachers' ratings of their students' skills and abilities and (c) parent surveys.

Findings indicated that over 80 percent of the students' parents expected their children to graduate from college. Teachers reported that children's academic, social and communication skills peaked in the first grade and then declined through the second grade. Furthermore, approximately 15 percent of the children were retained at least once by the third grade. However, there was not a comparison group

selected, and therefore it is unknown how these findings compare to children who did not attend pre-k (Henry, et al., 2002, p.3).

It should be noted that some research findings of typical community programs do not show the same results as experimental programs (Helburn, 1999). For instance, Reynolds et al. (2001) found that the children in the comparison group who attended the public school programs did not fare as well as the children enrolled in the high quality Child-Parent Centers. Therefore, simply bringing young children together for some type of early education program does not ensure that children's learning outcomes will be higher. However, Frede (1995), who conducted a literature review of several preschool studies, stated thatallpreschool programs that do have positive effects on children's development have commonalities with the experimental programs. As a result, characteristics of high quality early intervention programs should provide meaningful information concerning how valuable a pre-k experience can be for a child provided similar characteristicsare present.

Characteristics of High Quality Preschool

A plethora of research has been conducted concerning quality in child care and public school contexts experienced by young children (Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000). When quality is being considered, professionals in the early childhood field typically look at two forms of quality: structural features and global processes. The structural features are quantifiable and easy to regulate. They include teacher-child ratio, total class size, teacher qualifications, and fiscal aspects of care such as

upkeep of facilities and teacher salary. Global processes are frequently assessed with the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998), and include teacher-child interactions and environmental factors, such as materials and activities available to the children. Other processes commonly identified as important to quality include opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development activities and parental involvement. (McWilliam, deKruif & Zulli, 2002; Phillips, et al., 2000).

Teacher-Child Ratio

Several studies indicate that teachers are able to interact with children more when the teacher-to-child ratio is low. Phillips, Scarr, and McCartney (1987) conducted a study in which they found higher verbal intelligence and language development in children attending classrooms with low staff-child ratios. Kontos and Keyes (1999) determined that the probability of children engaging in complex interactions with objects and peers was related to low teacher-child ratio. In another study, Howes and Rubenstein (1985) determined that the quality of the caregiver-child relationship, measured by positive interactions and teacher responsiveness to children's questions, was higher when there was a smaller caregiver- child ratio. Therefore, it is important to consider the number of children for which a teacher is responsible. In Frede's reviews (1995; 1998), she found the common structural trait of low teacher-child ratios (for 3- and 4-year-olds, 1 to 6) present in effective programs.

In thinking about teacher-child ratio, however, it also seems important to consider who is being called a "teacher" in the phrase *teacher-child ratio*. In the public schools, the issue becomes more complex than simply the ratio, because often in public school early childhood settings the teacher-child ratio is made lower with the addition of a teaching assistant. The assistant is usually a paraprofessional with some early childhood training, or may simply be someone who enjoys working with young children (Honig & Hirallal, 1998). There is no research pertaining to assistants in pre-k classrooms. However, Achilles, Finn, Gerber, and Boyd-Zaharias (2000) examined the relationship between the presence of a full-time assistant in a K-3 classroom and child outcomes. Additionally, the researchers looked at whether the nature of the aide's duties was related to student achievement. Results indicated that teacher assistants were not related to classroom achievement. The researchers concluded that teacher aides were not a suitable substitute for small classes in the early grades.

Class Size

Class size is similar to teacher-child ratio in grades kindergarten through third in the public school setting, and can be used as a proxy measure of the amount of teacher-child interaction that will occur. However, while class size and teacher-child ratio are similar, they are not synonymous. For instance, a preschool class with 30 students and five teachers/teacher assistants would not be as beneficial to young children as a class with 12 students and two teachers, even though the ratio of each one would be 6:1 (Ferguson, 1998). Krueger (1997) found that the smaller the class

size, the higher the student scores on standardized achievement tests, particularly for inner city children. Also, a large-scale study (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 2000) indicated that reducing class size from 22-26 to 13-17 children in kindergarten through third grade was associated with higher student achievement for several years, including through middle school. While the latter study was not conducted on preschool children, but focused on the school success of kindergarten and primary-aged children, the results still point to the association of class size with desirable outcomes, particularlyfor young children. Furthermore, Howes (1991) found that in child care, if there were an addition of even one child to the group, the children's cognitive outcomes were lower. Therefore, the two related features of teacher-child ratio and total class size are important factors to consider in providing quality early childhood settings. These studies support Frede (1995; 1998) in saying class size is a significant issueto consider when looking at desirable outcomes for chil dren.

Teacher Qualificationsand Opportunities for Growth

Another commonality among high quality preschools involved the teachers' qualifications. Honig and Hirallal (1998) conducted research among 24 urban child care centers, and observed 81 caregivers of children three to five years of age. Results indicated that teachers who had early childhood education and child development coursework had more positive teacher-childnteractions than those who did not have the coursework. Other research has pointed toward a relationship between the type and amount of early childhood teachers' education and numerous measures of program quality. These measures include enhanced literacy

environments and positive guidance techniques (Barnett, 1998; Clarke-Stewart & Gruber, 1994). Whitebook (2003) conducted an extensive literature review concerning the relationship between prekindergarten teacher preparation and outcomes for children in early childhood education. The review focused on one central question—do teachers with a bachelor's degree or higher in early childhood education provide better prekindergarten experiences than teachers with less education and training? Together the studies indicated that the

> teacher's education makes an important contribution to creating a high-quality, center-based preschool program. Moreover, it's not simply more education that makes the difference, but a bachelor's degree and specialized early childhood training at the college level. (Whitebook, 2003, p. 9)

Other studies indicate that quality in early childhood classrooms is affected by opportunities for teachers' personal and professional growth (Espinosa, 2002; Phillipsen, et al., 1997; Scarr, et al., 1994). Espinosa found these opportunities for personal and professional growth to include paid leave to attend professional meetings, encouragement to participate in action research, support for being involved in professional organizations, and time to interact with others who teach in similar settings. Scarr, et al. (1994) also found that teachers need time to reflect on what they do and to collaborate with other teachers with whom they work. Therefore, activities in which the preschool teachers can work with the kindergarten and higher grade teachers, as well as other pre-k teachers, are helpful for the teachers' professional growth. In sum, the qualifications of teachers in pre-k classrooms,

along with time to collaborate and engage in professional development, are essential to providing the early childhood experiences young children need.

Phillips (1987) wrote of an "iron triangle" of quality, including teacher-child ratio, class size, and teacher qualifications, stating that when one of the three features is good, the other two tend to be good as well. Understanding this helps the desired child outcomes to be within reach for those concerned about young children. These characteristics not only seem to be important in having positive child outcomes, but also seem to influence the other processes and structural quality features of early childhood programs (Phillips & Howes, 1987; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993, Phillips, et al., 2000).

Further research indicating the value of high quality settings looked at the issue more globally, rather than focusing on just one aspect. This research involved looking at the processes as well as the structural features. The Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team (1995) found thata higher classroom quality index (i.e. ECERS rating) was associated with positive child outcomes, including greater receptive language ability, higher pre-math skills, more advanced social skills, and more positive self-perceptions. Moreover, the effect of higher classroom quality on receptive language was greater for minority children. In additional longitudinal work conducted with a subsample from the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study, Peisner-Feinberg et al. (1998) found that children receiving better quality child care have enhanced cognitive and social outcomes throughout the early school years regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Parental Involvement

Frede (1998) stated in her review of the pre-k research that a high amount of parental involvement was found in high-quality preschools. The kind of parental involvement in which the teacher and parent both shared information with each other about the child was determined to be the most beneficial. This type of collaboration seemed to accomplish two goals: to improve interactions between the parent and child, and to help the teacher understand the child better. These two outcomes benefited all three parties in the parent-teacher-child relationship.

Swap (1993) noted that a strong home-school partnership is a necessity due to recent societal changes. These changes include increased differences in living arrangements, such as grandparents helping to parent children and an increased number of single parents (Fields, 2003). Another change, in addition to variations in family structure, is the increased mobility of families (Procidano & Fisher, 1992). The schools are now seen as stable institutions that are available for all families to connect to the community (Jacobson, 2002). Therefore, now that the preschool year is quickly becoming the transition year into public schools, it is the preschool teacher who becomes the first contact families have with this stable institution called public school.

Epstein (1992) identified six major types of parental involvement, each of which may be operationalized by many practices that schools use to encourage parents to be more involved. The six types of involvement include (1) assisting families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, and ways to arrange

the home environment to support learning; (2) communicating with families regarding school activities through both one-way and two-way communication; (3) increasing ways to involve families in volunteering efforts and as audiences for student programs; (4) helping families with learning activities at home; (5) including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities; and (6) collaborating with the community to use resources such as agencies, universities, and other groups.

Knowing that school practices influence family involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993), it is valuable for teachers to be aware that a home-school partnership enhances the child's success in school. Furthermore, activities involving parents at home with their children about a specific subject are likely to benefit student achievement in that subject. This was determined from a study conducted by Dauber and Epstein (1993), in which they randomly selected eight Title I schools to participate in an action research program. Data from 171 teachers in these eight schools revealed that teachers wanted parents to be more involved. Findings from parent reports in this same study included a higher level of parental involvement in younger children's schooling compared to older children. Also, teacher practices that encourage parent involvement are the strongest predictors of parental involvement at school and at home.

Marcon's (1993) work supports parent involvement as a quality indicator. She studied the effects of parental involvement on children's academic achievement, using a sample of 168 inner-city children. The children were divided into two

groups based on parent involvement levels: the one group consisted of parents who were considered highly involved, while the second group had parents who were considered uninvolved Results indicated that children whose parents had high parental involvement in the child's second year in school had higher grades and higher achievement test scores at the end of their fifth year in school compared to children whose parents were noninvolved.

Curriculum

Other processes specified as important in determining quality in the classroom include teacher-child interactions, room arrangement, content and teaching methodologies, and materials and activities available to the children. These features are wrapped up in the term "curriculum." A review of early childhood curriculum research, although not exhaustive, illuminates important issues concerning curriculum. Frede's (1998) review determined commonalities in high quality early childhood programs among curriculum content and processes. However, the term *curriculum* conjures up numerous mental images. Therefore, before expanding on curricular commonalities found in high quality programs, a discussion of the ways curriculum is viewed is an important step in exploring how it is used in pre-k classrooms.

Philosophical Views Concerning Curriculum

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) explained philosophical positions underlying three curricular-related schools of thought or ideologies. The focus of each of these three educational ideologies is a distinctive way of viewing the manner in which

young children learn and develop. For example, a romantic ideology is held by educators who believe that development unfolds like a flower through stages. They see curriculum in early childhood classrooms as simply allowing children to "blossom" (p. 455) and to attempt activities when they are ready. Early childhood educators who uphold this ideology view the teacher and student as passive, merely allowing biology to ensure the child develops in his own time

The cultural transmission ideology asserts thatthe learner receives information from the teacher. Thus, curriculum is viewed as facts that are important for the students to know, and are passed on from the teacher to the student. In this instance, the learner is passive, and the curriculum is controlled by the teacher. Advocates of direct instruction uphold the cultural transmission ideology, and often describe their goals and objectives as being a systematic way for all children to learn. These teachers would say direct instruction is the best way for disadvantaged children to learn, due to the fact that their home lives may not have exposed them to facts deemed worth knowing by the dominant culture (Seefeldt & Galper, 1998).

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) also described a third view, which was quite different from the two aforementioned philosophies. Interactionism, the third educational ideology, views curriculum as mental, physical and social activity that comes from the teacher and students, who together are active initiators of the learning process. Thus, "the curriculum emerges from the child…and the content" (Seefeldt & Galper, 1998, p.173), and is experienced through classroom activities.

These educational philosophies are represented by curriculum models that have been in use in the early childhood field for quite some time. Not surprisingly, a common question that has been asked since the 1960s among early childhood educators is whether one curriculum modelis better than another. In a landmark study, Miller and Dyer (1975) conducted an experimental comparison of four prekindergarten programs with a three-year longitudinal follow-up through second grade. The two main purposes of the study were to gain information on program dimensions and to assess program effects of four specific curriculum models on the 4-year-olds' development. The four preschool curricula were Montessori, a program of sensorial and practical life materials; Bereiter-Engelmann, a very structured academic drill approach; DARCEE, a pre-academic program with direct instruction and a focus on motivation; and a traditional nursery school program, with blocks, dramatic play props, and large amounts of time for play. The Montessori method had some components of both the maturationist and interactionist philosophies. The traditional nursery school program, in which there were large amounts of time for play with props and blocks, yet with little teacher facilitation, was an example of the maturationist philosophical view. Two of the programs, the Bereiter-Engelmann and DARCEE approaches were more didactic in nature, and came from a cultural transmission philosophy. Findings showed that curricula were associated with differential child outcomes in several domains: cognitive development, language development, and social adjustment.

The Bereiter-Engelmann and DARCEE approaches showed immediate cognitive gains, yet those gains diminished by the second grade. Conversely, the children in the traditional nursery school program and the Montessori method had outcomes of higher cognitive and language development than the children in the Bereiter-Engelmann and DARCEE classrooms. In contrast, Miller and Dyer noted more desirable levels of social adjustment for children in the traditional nursery school and Montessori programs compared to children in the Bereiter-Engelmann and DARCEE programs.

More recent curriculum comparison research has included a variety of child outcome variables: child stress, interpersonal reasoning, and motivation for learning. Hyson and Molinaro (2001) noted that teacher practices that emphasize worksheets, pre-academics and drill, while downplaying child choice and decision making, lead to higher levels of child stress. Furthermore, the effects seem to be more pronounced among boys (Burts et al., 1992). This more recent research seems to favor curricula that are a part of the interactionist, or cognitive-developmental ideology, but the question of what curriculum is best has not been settled. It continues to be examined in the context of the debate over developmentally appropriate practices.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Goffin and Wilson (2001) compared curriculum models, and concluded in part that they "have potential for instigating both positive and negative consequences for children as well as the early childhood profession" (p. 9). The selection and practice of choosing a curriculum model is a task about which professionals in the

early childhood field have written a great deal. As teachers and others have discussed curricular issues concerning young children, the subject has often centered on *developmentally appropriate practices*. This term has become an icon for early childhood educators. Bredekamp and Copple defined developmentally appropriate practices as those practices

> that result from the process of professionals making decisions about the well-being and education of children based on at least three important kinds of information or knowledge: what is known about child development and learning…; what is known about the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child in the group…; and knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. (1997, 8-9)

Those who support developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) do so based on the belief that these classroom practices enhance children's development and facilitate learning. Certainly a considerable amount of research has been generated concerning DAP, with the earliest studies focusing on child stress and emotional development. Hyson and Hirsh-Pasek (1990) found that preschool children enrolled in child-initiated programs, which were described as being more developmentally appropriate, displayed lower levels of test anxiety than children enrolled in academic programs. Another study conducted by Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, and Kirk (1990) examined total stress behaviors throughout the day as well as during group times and workbook/worksheet activities. Findings from this research revealed the occurrence

of far more total stress behaviors for children who participated in classrooms that did not use developmentally appropriate practices.

Other studies concerning developmentally appropriate practices centered on cognitive development, and again, children in DAP classrooms scored higher on measures of student creativity than academically oriented classrooms (Hirsh-Pasek, Hyson, & Rescoria, 1990). Marcon (1992) found DAPclassrooms associated with higher verbal skills than classrooms that were developmentally inappropriate. Furthermore, children's receptive language was better in programs where developmentally appropriate activities were more prevalent (Dunn, Beach, & Kontos, 1994). Young children in developmentally appropriate programs also seemed more confident in their own cognitive skills (Mantizicopoulos, Neuharth-Pritchett, & Morelock, 1994). Additionally, longitudinal studies suggest there may be long term benefits to DAP. Children enrolled in preschools high in DAP were found to perform better academically in the first grade than children in classrooms considered low in DAP (Frede & Barnett, 1992). Also, children of low socioeconomic status who attend appropriate kindergarten classrooms tend to have better reading achievement scores in first grade than children attending inappropriate classrooms (Burts et al., 1992).

Developmentally appropriate practices and the surrounding research has also met with criticism. Van Horn and Ramey (2003) questioned several of the studies above which found benefits for classrooms engaged in developmentally appropriate practices, and argued that the methodological approaches were not appropriate (i.e.

absence of random assignment, no multilevel statistical modeling). Van Horn and Ramey conducted a study among former Head Start students and their classmates to examine the extent to which DAP in the primary grades is associated with children's academic and receptive language outcomes. Two groups were randomly selected from 31 participating schools. The dataset consisted of 1,564 children in 869 classrooms during the first data collection period. They applied multilevel growth curve modeling techniques to estimate the overall effects of DAP on academic skills and receptive language. The researchers found no beneficial effects for developmentally appropriate practices over developmentally inappropriate practices. One problem with their research was that DAP was measured by using a scale called A Developmentally Appropriate Template (ADAPT) (Gottlieb, 1995). While the ADAPT is considered to have high content validity, it measures what is taught rather than how it is taught. DAP as defined by Bredekamp & Copple (1997) was never meant to be a checklist of classroom content, but rather a way of thinking about children and the way adults interact with children in and out of the classroom (i.e. the "how" of teaching).

In using developmentally appropriate practice as a framework, the curriculum is seen as all-encompassing, in that children's well-being is as much a concern as their education. This concern is validated by the idea that early care and education is the same (Caldwell, 1984). Therefore, decisions the teacher makes concerning the well-being and education of children result in her curriculum, both in the processes and content she chooses to include. The content the teacher chooses to include in

daily activities is directly related to the methodology, or the way she teaches the content. Both the curriculum and methodology are tied to the techniques the teacher uses to socialize children. These techniques include the role the teacher plays in the classroom, what she emphasizes in the curriculum, and what strategies she uses in carrying out her personal knowledge with the students in her care. This view of curriculum combines methodology and socialization to comprise the teacher's pedagogy (National Research Council, 2001), which is another way of describing the experiential curriculum in the classroom with the adult(s) and children present.

The idea that curriculum is actually the classroom experience constructed by the teacher and children represents an interactionist philosophical view, also referred to by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) as a cognitive-developmental ideology. Consistent with this ideology, Connelly and Clandinin (1996) developed the view of teachers as curriculum makers, rather than curriculum users. They explained this as "the experienced curriculum," and further stated,

> Curriculum making on the landscape outside the classroom is sometimes called the planned or mandated curriculum…Sometimes teachers practice by teaching and sometimes teachers practice by planning. Both kinds of curriculum making are expressions of teachers' personal practical knowledge. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1996, p. 99)

The curriculum making includes practices such as preparing and overseeing the environment, changing what was planned for the day to meet immediate needs of children, and serving as an advocate when a mandated prescriptive curriculum is not

developmentally appropriate for young children. These ideas are consistent with DAP and its emphasis on the teacher as decision-maker. How these ideas are carried out, however, is determined by the teacher's philosophical view, or in Connelly and Clandinin's (1996) words, her[1] personal practical knowledge. This may include the teacher using any of the three ideologies to enact curriculum, depending on the circumstances.

Common Processes and Content in Curriculum Found Among High-Quality Programs

Having established what frames a teacher's classroom practices, it is possible to identify important commonalities in the processes teachers used and the content they introduced in high-quality programs. For instance, the programs exposed children to classroom activities that were similar to those they would experience in higher grades. The processes included whole group, small group, and individual activities. Tasks such as learning to wait your turn, raising your hand when you want to share something with the group, and even learning about other people in the school set the tone for the children and helped them transition to kindergarten and the primary grades (Frede, 1995).

The content of high-quality preschool programs involved traditional nursery school and kindergarten topics, such as transportation, animals, holidays, colors and numbers. "This focus on typical, everyday topics may have offered continuity that eased the child's move from home to preschool, even as the classroom experience prepared the child for the transition from preschool to school" (Frede, 1995, p.124).

Additionally, curriculum content was high in its focus on language and literacy activities in all high quality programs. Children were read to as a large group, in small groups, and individually several times daily. Children were also given the opportunity to look at books independently. Environmental print and labeling were a part of the physical environment. Writing materials of all types were available for the children. Ample opportunities were given for children to talk and share their ideas. Dramatic play activities were encouraged to facilitate language development. Songs, flannel stories, finger plays and puppets were all used as the classroom community played with words. Through the word play, sounds and their meanings became important for the children (Morrow, 1999). And through all of these activities combined, literacy emerged as these children experienced a wide variety of language-related activities on a daily basis.

Curriculum as a Political Issue

Unfortunately, curriculum is not just a word describing what the teacher and children do in the classroom, but has also become a political issue (Thompson, 2003). In the current political climate of the United States, curriculum content has been touted as the avenue through which young children will be successful and "ready to learn" (Heim, 2004). This phrase, which is typically accompanied by a naive belief that learning is acquiring a certain set of facts and skills, permeates political speeches (Robelen, 2003). Added to the problem of politicians using early childhood curriculum as a means of obtaining votes is the dilemma in which early

childhood professionals find themselves, of being made to feel responsible for children's later success.

Curriculum is a political issue for educators as well (Walsh, 1992). In the early childhood field, there is much conflict over what should be taught (curriculum), how it should be taught (methodology), and how much time should be devoted during the day (or one-half day) to socialization. The conflict seems to center around how much time the children should spend in play, and what exactly constitutes play in the early childhood classroom. These questions concerning curriculum seem to loom in current debate over pre-k, although most who discuss the topic will agree that preschool is important for children at risk, and that they truly need early education. Gross (2002) described the schools' desire to push curriculum and use standardized testing as a kind of educational flu, the pressure which continually makes the teachers and other stakeholders ill. There is also a considerable amount of debate as to the purposes of pre-k and the role of the teacher in accomplishing those purposes. One question that continually arises surrounds the idea of readiness.

Readiness

Graue (1993) conducted a case study in which she examined three major views of the term *readiness* as it is used in the early childhood field. She found that instead of readiness being a characteristic of the child, it is actually a constructed meaning by communities and stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and parents. Graue further found that readiness for school was rarely defined in research literature pertaining to the topic. Instead, the term was usually assumed to be a

construct that was universally understood. Furthermore, "Readiness for school was often operationalized as performance on a kindergarten-administered test or by comparing younger and older children on performance [such as] grades, teacher ratings, [and] test scores" (Graue, 1993, p. 9). She also indicated that the idea of readiness held by a school (or school system) affects that school's classroom practices in kindergarten and the primary grades.

Wesley and Buysse (2003) examined beliefs and expectations regarding school readiness among parents and public school personnel. These researchers conducted focus groups and used a content analysis of the transcripts from the focus group meetings to examine ideas of school readiness among the various stakeholders taking part in the group discussions. While their concentration was centered on the purposes of kindergarten and the role of the kindergarten teacher in achieving those purposes, some of what they determined regarding readiness can be applied to the year before kindergarten. Findings from analysis of the data indicated that teachers, parents and principals all feel a great pressure to push academics. Another common theme introduced in all of the focus groups was that some children come to school too prepared. This indicated that children are desensitized to violence, sex, and other adult themes. Interestingly, Wesley and Buysse indicated that a number of questions were raised in this study concerning readiness for children "who do not fit the school's prototype of the ready child—children whose skills…have not emerged in time to be noted on a school checklist" (2003, p. 370).

Children at Risk and Early Education

Most of the research surrounding the effects of public preschool attendance has focused on children living in poverty, primarily because many children from affluent homes attend private nursery schools, but also because the children with low socioeconomic status have so many difficulties in school. Children living in poverty are considered to be at risk for school success and historically have not had their needs met. Other at-risk children are those with limited English proficiency (LEP), and those diagnosed with disabilities or developmental delays (National Study Panel on Education Indicators, 1991). Additionally, there is an especially strong association between poverty and poor social, cognitive, and academic outcomes for children who are exposed to multiple risks (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Hart & Risley, 1995; Kaiser & Delaney, 1996).

Children Living in Poverty

Several aforementioned studies indicated that high-quality preschools make a difference in the lives of impoverished children. A collaborative study led by Lazar and Darlington (1982) assessed the long-term effects of early childhood education experiences for children living in poverty. This multi-sample secondary analysis looked at 12 programs developed in the 1960s, and conducted a collaborative follow-up of the original subjects. This study addressed two general questions: Were there long-term effects of early childhood programs? Were programs more effective for some subgroups of the low-income population than for others? Results showed that these programs had long-lasting effects in four areas: (a) school competence

(measured by less special education placement and grade retention); (b) developed abilities (measured by standardized intelligence tests); (c) children's attitudes and values, particularly toward school; and (d) a positive impact on the family (especially maternal attitudes toward school and future career goals).

Because so many issues of preschool education center on helping children in poverty, it is important to explore the magnitude of the problem. According to data collected by the Children's Defense Fund, 14.5 million American children currently live in poverty, and the number is particularly high for young families. Poverty in young families, defined as families whose parent(s) are under the age of 30, has more than doubled since 1973, leaving 41 % of children from this group living in poverty (Shames, 1998). This staggering statistic has serious implications, which Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) discussed after explaining the relationship between poverty and child outcomes. They found that family income has quite substantial effects on child well-being, and appears to be more strongly related to children's ability and achievement than to their emotional outcomes. They found that children from families with low income have low achievement in school. Also, children who experience poverty during their preschool and early school years have lower rates of school completion than children and adolescents who experience poverty only in later years.

Some encouraging findings, however, indicate that intervention during early childhood may be the most important factor in reducing poverty's impact on children (Barnett, 1998). The attitude that has been prevalent historically, that helping poor

children would homogenize the abilities of children entering the primary grades so that all the students would be on equal footing (Beatty, 1995), is different from goals of intervening and compensatory education. The hope is not as much to catch up the poor children to the level of middle-class children, but rather to mediate the effects of poverty for those involved. Intervention is not only found in the activities of the preschool classroom, but also found in services that meet the physical, medical and other needs that may exist for the child (Barnett, 1998; Helburn, 1999; Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Shore, 1997).

Children with Limited English Proficiency

The children and families served by pre-k programs mirror the nationwide growth in numbers of people speaking languages other than English. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that the number of LEP children attending a public preschool was as high as 22 % in urban areas. Additionally, there is a correlation between the number of students enrolled who are eligible for free or reduced lunches and the number of children who do not speak English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Thus, schools that deal with high poverty, as seen in the number of free and reduced lunches, are also likely to deal with a large number of LEP children. Working with so many children who are considered at risk for school failure provides particular challenges for teachers who work with the preschoolers and their families (Barnett, 1998).

While the number of children who are English language learners is increasing, working with families from numerous cultures has been a part of the

early childhood teacher's role for over a century. Unfortunately, a lack of respect for families and their cultures was found in one of the early goals of preschool education, which was to help immigrant children become more "normal" (Beatty, 1995, p. 182), and this attitude still exists. For example, a current issue in preschool education is whether a real purpose of public preschool should be to help children learn English so they will be "ready for kindergarten" (p. 182). Instead of this attitude, the goal should be to involve the child in learning activities that allow him[1] to keep his home language and culture intact while learning about himself, others, and the world (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The first step in involving the young English language learner in these types of learning activities is to have a clear understanding of how language develops in young children generally, and in children who are learning two languages specifically. One important aspect of the young child's development of a second language is the nonverbal or silent period (Tabors, 1997). This period, characterized by the child's refusal to talk has been studied extensively and was found to bedue to a realization that he can not communicate with those around him in his home language. The nonverbal period seems to last longer for younger children than for children who are older. However, as Tabors noted, even though the child has stopped talking, it does not mean that he has stopped communicating. Most children instead engage in various ways of communicating nonverbally, and during this time also use spectating and rehearsing techniques to learn their new language. Then,

once they feel competent in using their new language, they begin to speak to make their wishes known.

Early childhood educators have experimented with several types of classroom formats to achieve the goal for LEP children of valuing their home languages while helping them learn the new one. Tabors (1997) described three typical types of classrooms for young children learning English: (a) the English-language classroom, in which all interactions take place in English; (b) the bilingual classroom, in which there are two teachers, one speaking each language, who split the interaction time between the two languages; and (c) the first-language classroom, in which the teacher is a native speaker of and teaches in the child's home language.

All three classroom approaches to teaching language-minority students have been shown to have positive effects on English language development, (Paul & Jarvis, 1992; August & Hakuta, 1997; Rodriguez, Diaz, Duran, & Espinosa, 1995). However, when the child's home language is not used or taught in the classroom, his development in the native language declines. Therefore, it is vital to the child's self esteem and continual development in the home language that the child is able to speak in his home language at school (Tabors, 1997).

A more positive approach to literacy instruction for children who are English language learners lies in the realization that there are hidden home and community resources for all students (Moll, 1992) that teachers can access. Moll conducted research into the lives of working-class Mexican-American students and their families in the barrio schools of Tucson, Arizona. He and co-investigators found that

many of the families had a vast knowledge base that the schools did not know about, and, therefore, did not incorporate into the classroom. Generally speaking, the barrio families knew about mining and agriculture, economics, household management, science and medicine, and religion. What was even more exciting was that the families shared what they knew with others in their community. Thus, there was a great amount of knowledge embraced by this group of which the schools were unaware. As teachers who participated in Moll's study began to change their teaching approaches to bring in people from the community and share their "funds of knowledge" (1987, p. 302), the students became more interested and began to make gains in all aspects of literacy development. Thus, there areways teachers can help children who are English language learners, even if they do not speak the child's home language.

Schools continue to struggle with issues surrounding meeting the needs of LEP students. As the number of children speaking another language at home increases in public schools, further preparation of preservice teachers may be needed to meet the demands. The increase also provides more questions to ask public preschool teachers as their experiences are researched. A conceptual framework for understanding issues surrounding classroom practices and framing the phenomenological study is presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: Conceptual Framework and Research Design

The central focus of this research and analysis is the teacher's experience in public preschool education. The classroom is that special place wherea large part of this experience is lived out. In considering the pre-k teacher's work, the mind's eye generally travels to an early childhood classroom with the teacher, a group of young children, and possibly an assistant. What the teacher chooses to do in that setting, from arranging the physical and temporal environment of the classroom, to the practices she actually engages in throughout her daily routines of teaching, are considered her experiences.

The Interpersonal Aspect of the Preschool Teacher's Experiences

However, also embedded in the public preschool teacher's experiences are the groups of people with whom she works, as well as the activities in which she engages, not only in, but also outside of the classroom. These groups of people include the children and their families, who are certainly a major focus of the teacher's work. Additionally, others who work in the school setting, such as other teachers and the principal, also affect her experiences. Then, paraprofessionals including teaching assistants, and support staff, consisting of the secretary, cafeteria workers and custodians, comprise a large group of individuals in the relational landscape in which the teacher finds herself. Interactions with all of these people are a large part of the teacher's work day, and, therefore, a part of her lived experience.

Other people with whom she may not have direct contact also affect the teacher's experience, such as policymakers and revenue providers from federal, state

and local governments. The decisions made in these arenas can quicklychange what professional activities will be required of the teacher. Furthermore, professional organizations and learned societies publish position statements stating what should occur in classrooms. Finally, public and private sources provide funding to implement and evaluate specific practices, and the funding sources often influence which brands of curriculum materials the teacher will use, or how assessment will take place. Thus,there are a number of outside entities that directly and indirectly affect teachers' professional experiences.

Even another group of people in the preschool teacher's professional life should include those who work in other areas of the early childhood field , such as early care and education providers in nursery schools, Head Start centers and child care facilities. Also, preschool teachers from other school systems and members of professional organizations to which the teacher belong should be a part of the teacher's professional life. This professional community should provide a home base for teachers to go for support.

Because the teacher's landscape involves so many interpersonal interactions, as well as activities inside and out of the classroom, understanding the essence of the public preschool teacher's lived experience is a complex undertaking. The interpersonal aspect of the teacher's lived experience should be considered as a valuable part of the framework, in addition to activities surrounding curriculum and classroom duties. Several key theories have greatly influenced early childhood education and have often been used to explain the activities inside and outside of the

classroom. These child development theories are lenses through which the lived experience can be interpreted.

The Influence of Child Development Theories

Spodek and Saracho (1999) articulated how influential child development theories serve as a conceptual framework for teachers as they make decisions. These influential theories can readily be identified within the philosophical views stated by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) in Chapter II. While the following three theories are certainly not exhaustive in explaining aspects of an early childhood teacher's experience, maturationism, behaviorism, and constructivism serve as key paradigms in early childhood teachers' professional lives.

Maturationism

The romantic ideology described by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) is articulated by maturationism, an influential theory in early childhood education. Maturationism depicts the child's naturally occurring development as something that should be allowed to unfold based on the individual's genetic makeup. Teachers who are greatly influenced by this theory feel they should provide a match between what a child is capable of doing developmentally with opportunities to "bloom" according to the individual child's developmental pattern. Adult intervention is seen as intrusive. In addition, if the teacher offers too great a challenge, the child will only be frustrated. Maturationists advocate child-centered curriculum that is permissive, allowing the children to only do what they are "ready" to do. They also

see play as an unstructured time, in which activities and themes are chosen with little facilitation from the teacher (DeVries, Zan, & Hildebrandt, 2002).

The concept of readiness that advocates delaying a child's entry to kindergarten is an example of using maturationism to frame decisions regarding when children should begin school. A continual focus on stages of development in everything from block building to ways children cut with scissors are also indicators of a maturationist mindset. Certainly, all people who work with young children understand that children develop sequentially, and this development can often be seen in stages through which the child passes. However, constantly interpreting children based solely on their age is one example of a teacher's personal theory based on maturationism manifesting itself. Additionally, simply letting children play without the facilitation of the teacher providing materials that children need or without talking to children about what they are doing are also examples of a teacher using maturationist theory as a classroom framework.

Behaviorism

The cultural transmission ideology is often expressed through behaviorist approaches to teaching and learning. Behaviorism is another grand theory of learning and development that has influenced early childhood teachers' curriculum, methodology, and socialization techniques. Unlike the maturationists, the behaviorists believe that the greatest influence on development is the learning that comes from environmental influences (Spodek & Saracho, 1999). When teachers of young children provide children with extensive drill and practice to learn a skill, they

are making decisions based on behaviorist thought. Rewards, such as stickers and prizes, or classroom rewards, such as a pizza party are also behaviorist in origin (Sharply, 1988). Other ways the influences of behaviorism are played out in early childhood curriculum is when prior knowledge is identified, and a complex task is taught in small steps. A common example of this is how to tie one's shoe, a skill typically taught and practiced in pre-k, kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The children learn how to do so one step at a time, until the task is completely learned. In a behaviorist classroom, children's play is seen as an opportunity to discover through the modeling of another child how to perform a task.

Constructivism

From interactionism, according to Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) comes a different way of thinking about children and learning. Constructivists seek to explain learning and development by saying that individuals actively construct their own knowledge out of their experiences (DeVries, et al., 2002). Children bring some knowledge about their world to the classroom, and this understanding helps them interpret what they perceive in the school setting. Then new information also helps them modify their interpretation. Furthermore, this process of gaining information and evolving new ways of interpreting that information is a continual process throughout the person's life (Spodek and Saracho, 1999). From the constructivist's point of view, maturation, education, or expressing one's feelings cannot make a difference in a child's development, if one of these activities is viewed independently

of other aspects. Instead, the child uses all of this information to construct her knowledge about people and things, social and cognitive ideas, and a sense of self.

Unlike the maturationists, constructivists believe that children's ways of thinking become more complex by providing them with problems somewhat beyond their current capabilities. These problems should be too difficult for the child to do on his own, but attainable for the child with some adult assistance. When the child follows an adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help, development occurs. The sociocultural theorist Lev Vygotsky called this difference between what a child can do with assistance and what he can do without help as the "Zone of Proximal Development" (1990, p. 32). Within this zone, children's current level of development does not limit their ability to learn. Instead, what children discover in challenging situations, with the help of someone who understands it better than they do, extends their level of development.

Within the paradigm of constructivism, Vygotsky (1990) viewed development as taking place not only because of maturation, but also as a result of acquiring *cultural tools*. These tools connect children to their physical and cultural environment and help them achieve mastery over that environment. The cultural tools also change the ways in which a person thinks. Vygotsky believed the most important cultural tool that children learn to master is language. Language allows us to represent the world, to develop abstractions and even to think about something we have never seen. Language also allows us to imagine and to picture things that might be remote in time and space.

Families help young children acquire cultural tools, particularly language. In addition to families, schools play a role in the child's natural and cultural development. One way families and schools help children with their cultural development is to help them in language development. Another way is to introduce them to artifacts of the culture, such as a doctor's kit, or a replica of the artifact, such as a toy stethoscope. Vygotsky (1986) saw that using toys as playthings would socialize children into their later serious use of the tools. Another important point to consider in thinking about cultural tools is that the culture of the home and school are often different, and therefore, children may come to school without much knowledge of the school's cultural expectations. Therefore, when the aforementioned curriculum helps the child learn about the school culture, she can then use the cultural tools associated with school more readily.

Ultimately, it was Vygotsky's work that allowed educators to combine an understanding of children's development with different sources of curriculum, various sociocultural contexts of elementary schools and neighborhoods, and the teacher's own personal practical knowledge. In that combining process comes personal theory making of the teachers and the students. As Spodek and Saracho concluded,

> It [Vygotskian theory] requires that we challenge children's thinking while providing the supports to allow that thinking to be successful. It also requires that we provide children with the cultural tools that can help them make sense of their world and function well within their social context. His theory

> allows for diversity of programming based upon diversity of cultures, even though the strategies for supporting development through education may be similar from culture to culture. (1999, p. 10)

Constructivist theory places teachers as active participants, not only in helping children to develop, but in coming to know and understand their own professional experiences. This includes the teachers' professional lives in and out of the classroom, in working with children and with other adults, and in what they already understand and what they further want to understand. With this theoretical framework as a backdrop, the current inquiry was made into the public preschool teachers' experiences.

The Phenomenological Process: Searching for Meaning

In using the framework of the teacher's experiences within and outside of the classroom, the strategy for gaining fresh new knowledge about public preschool teachers was to conduct a phenomenological study. The transcendental phenomenological model that directs this study was guided by the researcher recognizing the value of qualitative design and methodology in order to study human experience. The focuswa s on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts. Thus, the data collection encompassed all of the teachers' professional landscapes. The research design accomplished this meaning-making search "by studying the people who live it and asking them how they think about their experiences" (Yow, 1994, p.7).

Methodology

The main research tool the researcher used to access the public preschool teacher's lived experience was the interview. These interviews did not use a question and answer format, but rather a "dialogical reflection" between the researcher and participant (Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994). In fact, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee is a significant part of this research method. It is a "shared work" in which there is a possibility of discovering through collaboration something not known previously (Yow, 1994). Finding out about teaching in a public preschool classroom from those who have "been there" was the goal of this study. These research goals led to decisions about what data to collect and the methodology for doing so.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher becomes an essential part of the study (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Langenbach et al., 1994). Therefore, the capabilities of the researcher become an important issue. Prior to this study, the researcher had taught preschool and kindergarten in a private setting, and first grade in the public schools. She held a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and was a doctoral candidate in Early Childhood Education. She currently works with early childhood teacher candidates at a regional university, supervising them in field experiences and mentoring them as first-year teachers. Additionally, she teaches college courses that keep her in contact with people entering the early childhood field who plan to fill a number of roles in the future. Because of her past and current experiences, the research question had been particularly intriguing to the researcher.

This interest and background in the real world of early childhood education assisted her as she led the interviews and collected other data.

A limitation of the study may be the inability of the researcher to "bracket" out preconceived ideas (Langenbach, et al., 1994). In addition to her experiences, reviewing the literature prior to the study could also hinder researcher interpretation. Similar to Ayers (1989) in his ethnographic work of early childhood teachers, there is an understanding that one's own life experiences frame what one sees of other teachers' life experiences in the classroom. The life experiences of the researcher should assist in gaining a holistic overview of the phenomenon under study, and in knowing what questions to ask during the in-depth interviews. Thus, personal experiences may be seen as a value rather than a limitation to the research, because it is easier to understand the lived experience of the public preschool teacher if the researcher has lived similar experiences herself. Yet, along with the value of the researcher having a knowledge base of preschool education, it is important that she set aside her preconceived ideas regarding preschool education (Moustakas, 1994). To assist the researcher to that end, the data collection and interpretation was reviewed by another researcher familiar with phenomenological methodology.

A phenomenological study has a limited population. Tesch (1990) places the number for this type of study between 5 and 15 participants. Phenomenological research requires the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews and in depth analysis to be able to report and illustrate the themes with rich description and quotations. The sample, therefore, is small yet directed in purpose. Data can be compared across

the sample but is not generalizable to the entire population of public preschool teachers.

Selection of Participants

After talking to a number of preschool teachers and others familiar with pre-k, it became evident that a useful approach would be to focus on one type of geographic setting: rural, suburban, or urban. Because the literature continually pointed to working with at-risk children, the researcher chose a large urban school system as the setting. The participants were all public preschool teachers who worked in the urban school system selected for study. After gaining permission from the university and the appropriate administrators in the district, the researcher explored the school system's web site to determine which schools had a pre-k program. She used this information as well as information from the Child Development Administrator for the district to create a sampling frame. From this frame the researcher selected pre-k teachers to contact, taking into consideration the various areas of the city and variety of types of programs. She telephoned several public preschool teachers, explained the study, and asked if they would be interested in meeting with her to find out more about what the study would involve. Six white females agreed, and each met individually with the researcher at her respective school before or after school at her convenience for an initial interview. After the researcher explained the entire process and each participant gave her written consent (Appendix A), the researcher left a survey (Appendix B) for the teacher to complete

before the interview date. Each teacher also agreed to collect formal and informal written communication relevant to her work for several weeks.

Of the six participants in the study, all taught in schools found in low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Three of the schools were considered typical neighborhood schools, housed in old buildings. One elementary building was a neighborhood school, but was different in that it was a new structure, having been constructed by funds from a special bond issue. The other two pre-k programs had settings with special characteristics: one was held off-site in the educational wing of a church building; and one in an arts integrated school. The six preschools are located in different geographic areas of the district, and all have diverse populations of children in attendance. The six participants and their schools, all of which have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, included: Lynn Carter, from Thomas Jefferson Elementary; Barbara Johnson, from Pecan Hill Elementary; and Claire Garnier, from Zachary Taylor Elementary. Another participant, Bev Jones, taught at the off-site pre-k classroom that was held in the children's educational wing at Carville Presbyterian Church. The other two participants were Sylvia O'Neal, from Garfield Elementary, and Marcie Shelton, who taught part time at Del Heights Elementary.

Data Collection and Storage

Creswell (1998) described the process of collecting information for a phenomenological study, stating that while the most important form of gaining understanding about this group's experiences was through an extended interview,

there were other meaningful ways to examine the phenomenon. For this study, a survey and a collection of written communication regarding the pre-k program were used in addition to the typical interviews. Each data source was generated by the participants, and, therefore, answers the trustworthiness issue of their experiences. In the analysis of comparing for themes, having three data sources provided depth and insight, and gave stronger trustworthiness to what they were saying. Some of the information gleaned from the surveys and written communication gave even more depth to what they said in the interviews.

Survey. The survey distributed at the initial contact interview was designed to collect descriptive data on the participants for background information and to frame possible questions to ask during the in-depth interview. The survey also had 20 statements concerning pre-k surrounding several topics: parental involvement, satisfaction with teaching preschool, resources, curriculum, and interactions with other professionals. These statements served as a springboard for the in-depth interview. There was also a place for the participants to write comments. The surveys were used both individually in the interviews, and also collectively by compiling the information to use as another view into the teachers' experiences. Thus the textural individual components and group structural descriptions illuminate the data collected from the surveys.

Interview. Each public preschool teacher related her experiences in an in-depth interview that was one and one-half to two hours in length. The interviews were conducted for the most part in the teacher's classroom, usually after school.

The participants were briefed in an initial meeting that the interview would be audio taped, but the interview content would remain confidential with only the interviewer knowing the identity of the participant on each tape. They were also informed of the purpose of the research project and how the results would be used. While the researcher had a list of questions (Appendix C) to use, the interviews each became a jointly-held discussion on the teachers' experiences in and out of the classroom. The participants seemed quite willing to participate and share both joys and challenges in their professional landscapes. The interviews were then transcribed and filed for the data analysis portion of the research project.

Formal and Informal Written Communication. Additional data were collected from the teachers by asking them to save copies of any written communication they received over the course of several weeks of the school year. This data included notes from the principal or other administrators, newsletters sent home to parents, and district standards and assessment tools for pre-k. This data collection contained a number of duplicates across participants, but was still compiled to be examined for textural and structural themes. What the teachers chose to collect was, in some ways, as informative as the printed information on the documents.

Organization of Data

A file was created for each participant. Then the transcriptions of the interviews, the field notes, surveys, and written communication were all filed accordingly. Copies of the data were also cross-filed into three folders: interviews, surveys, and written communication.

The researcher also compiled a large electronic file of newspaper articles, documents placed on the school system's web site, and information from the state Department of Education's web site, as well as several federal government web sites. Professional organizations have also published numerous documents regarding preschool education. This information proved to be valuable, not only in helping to reference information for the literature review, but also to help contextualize the study and to converse with the participants on topics relevant to their work.

Analysis of Data

The beginning point of data analysis was bracketing, or setting aside all prejudgments. This process, also referred to as the *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994), set aside the researcher's former experiences, and caused her to rely on intuition and imagination to gain an understanding of the preschool teachers' experiences (Creswell, 1998). The epoche also required thatshe learn to see what she can distinguish and describe.

The next process in the phenomenologicalresearch model was to move beyond the everyday thinking about preschool education to consider the information the teachers shared. This viewing of the participants' professional landscapes in a new way was called *transcendental-phenomenological reduction*. According to Moustakas (1994), it is called *transcendental* because it moves beyond the every day, and *phenomenological* because it "transforms the world into mere phenomena" (p. 34). Furthermore, this process is called a *reduction* because it leads back to the source of meaning and existence of the experiences of public preschool teachers.

Through the reduction process, a description of the essences and meanings of the phenomenon developed, and this development was carried out through a series of steps. First, through looking carefully at the data, the researcher used the process of horizonalization. Horizonalization means that every statement the teachers gave in the interviews, every teacher survey, and every piece of data taken from the notes and other communication had equal value at the beginning of the analysis. However, as analysis took place, some of the statements began to stand out as qualities of the experience that did not vary between participants (Moustakas, 1994). These invariant qualities then began to cluster into themes, so that the researcher could do two things: create an integrated description of the invariant textural themes of each individual research participant; and create an integrated description of the group by using those individual textural descriptions. These clustered ideas were what were left over after reduction and elimination of overlapping, repetitive and vague thoughts. At that point the clustered ideas were related into thematic labels, which were the core themes of the experience.

In the second step of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, the researcher attempted to vary the possible meanings and perspectives of the textural descriptions. In doing so, structures were formed which were then clustered into themes. The structures were viewed individually for each participant and as a group. In finding the essential structures, or essences, the researcher determined the central underlying meaning of the experience. These meanings emphasized the "intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward

appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

After finding the meaning, the final part of the process took place. In this last step, the researcher reflectively and intuitively integrated the composite textural with the composite structural descriptions. This resulted in a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the public preschool teachers' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The following chapter contains vignettes describing each teacher, her school, and her classroom. These descriptions assisted in understanding the themes that developed from analysis of the data.

CHAPTER IV: The Participants and Their Contexts

The urban school district in which all of the participants teach has approximately 1,900 children enrolled in early childhood programs at about three-fourths of its elementary schools. According to state law, the class size is limited to 20 children per classroom, and the certified teacher has an assistant. Throughout the district a total of 8,375 students speak a language other than English at home, and 50 native languages are represented. However, the number of pre-k children who are English language learners is not readily available.

The school district has an administrator from the central office who oversees the pre-k program district-wide. April Gipson, the Child Development Administrator, is also in charge of Parents as Teachers (PAT) and has other early childhood responsibilities. As a member of the academics division, April helps set up new pre-k classrooms, schedules and prepares in-service opportunities, and selects curricula for the pre-k classrooms. She does, however, allow the teachers to make decisions concerning their daily schedules, room arrangement, and how deeply involved they choose to be in implementing the selected supplemental phonics curriculum.

Lynn Carter at Thomas Jefferson Elementary

Thomas Jefferson Elementary is located near a major freeway and close to the metropolitan airport. The noise level due to those two factors is at times very high. The school building was built in 1949, but Lynn Carter said that parts of it had recently been renovated. The racial-ethnic composition of the school is comprised of

52 % Hispanic, 32 % white, 9 % African American, and 7 % American Indian children. No Asian American students are enrolled. Ninety per cent of the children at Jefferson are on free or reduced lunches, indicating a high number of impoverished families living in the school's catchment area. Children with limited English proficiency comprise 42.6 % of the school's population, and 13 % of the children qualify for special education services.

Lynn's classroom in Thomas Jefferson Elementary is next door to the kindergarten classroom and directly across the hall from the office. On the day of the initial recruitment interview, the kindergarten teacher was sharply reprimanding one of her students in the hall near Lynn's door. Parents, most of whom are Hispanic, were lined up outside of Lynn's door with their preschoolers and younger siblings, waiting for Lynn to open her door and tell them to enter. They watched the kindergarten teacher as she continued to raise her voice at the child, who was now staring at the floor. Several of them looked at the floor sheepishly while the kindergartener was being scolded.

Some of the parents of children attending the afternoon session typically arrive soon after the morning class leaves, making the wait in the hall close to 30 minutes for themselves and their children. Lynn's assistant, Maria, often comes out to greet them in Spanish and visit with them. On the day of the visit, Maria was busily preparing a note for the parents. Lynn had written the note in English earlier, and Maria was translating it into Spanish.

Round tables where the children sit and complete their work are the central focus of Lynn's classroom. Prepared activities are set out on the tables for the children to do when they enter the room. During the week of the initial recruitment interview, the theme was colors, and on the day the researcher visited, the children were learning about yellow. Since it was "yellow day," the prepared activities included a picture of a duck to sponge paint yellow, yellow paint in cups at the art easel, and a work sheet to complete, consisting of pictures of objects that might be colored yellow. There were a few centers set up around the periphery of the classroom, primarily an art easel and child-sized kitchen appliances in a dramatic play area. Lynn also had a number of shelves along two walls filled with games and teaching materials, all in their original boxes.

Lynn is a single parent in her early-40s with two teenage children. She holds both a bachelor's and master's degree in Early Childhood Education. Lynn has taught for 16 years, with the last 12 years being in pre-k. She originally taught kindergarten, and was asked to start the pre-k program at Jefferson 12 years ago. Lynn is the only pre-k teacher at that site. She explained that 12 years ago, when the program began, part of her job was recruiting children to enroll in the program. Now the program is full, with 20 children in the morning session and 20 in the afternoon. More parents would like their children to come, but the classroom space is not available for another pre-k classroom.

Barbara Johnson at Pecan Hill Elementary

Like Jefferson, Pecan Hill Elementary was also built in 1949, and is also in a very poor area. The sign in front of the school that greets visitors upon arrivalhas chipped, peeling paint with weeds around it. The racial-ethnic composition of this school's student population is somewhat different from Jefferson, however, in that 54 % are white, and only 26 % of the children are Hispanic. Ten per cent of the students are African American, and 10 % are American Indian. No Asian American children are enrolled. Free and reduced lunches are available to 80.2 % of the children in attendance. Children with limited English proficiency comprise 15.3 % of enrolled students, and 14.8 % of the students qualify for special education services. Interestingly, Pecan Hill has a special education preschool self-contained program for three- and four-year-olds diagnosed with developmental delays, but there is no attempt to provide any inclusionary activities for the children with disabilities in the "regular" pre-k classes.

There are two pre-k classes at Pecan Hill, housed on different sides of the building. Barbara Johnson teaches a pre-k group in the morning and kindergarten in the afternoon. There is another full-time pre-k teacher in the building whom Barbara described as being "a social development teacher, not as much cognitive." Barbara further stated, "The other preschool teacher is on the other side of the school," and indicated that there is very little collaboration between them.

Barbara's classroom is quite large, with big windows looking out onto a sparsely-equipped playground. Atone end of the room is a sink and countertop,

which was donated to the school, and installed by Barbara's husband. She further noted that the building has a continual problem with mice, stating that if children dropped food on the floor during snack, the teachers had to hurry and pick it up off the floor before mice would run across the floor and grab the food. "We have the finest computer equipment anyone could possibly want, but they can't seem to control all the critters that get in here from the outside. There must be a lot of holes in the walls." Barbara's classroom is also mainly arranged around round tables where the children sit. Like Lynn, Barbara prepared some learning centers around the edge of the room. Samples of the children's work are on display in the classroom, hung at adult eye level. Most of the work is craft-like artwork, such as scarecrow pieces that the children colored, cut out, assembled, and mounted on construction paper.

On the day of the interview, Barbara had just returned with her students and several other adults from a field trip, where they visited a pumpkin patch. These inner city children were able to ride in a wagon filled with hay and pulled by a tractor. There was a cost involved for the children to go, but even if a child did not bring money, he was able to attend, due to a fund for such purposes in the school office. Barbara and Estelle, her assistant, provided snacks for the field trip.

Barbara is in her early 40's, with a daughter in college, who is also planning to be an early childhood teacher. Barbara has a bachelor's degree in Family Relations-Child Development, with certification in Early Childhood Education. This was a common way for teachers to enter the public schools as an early childhood

teacher 20 years ago. She has also completed nine hours of graduate work in Early Childhood. Barbara has 20 years of teaching experience, with 10 years in pre-k. Neither Barbara nor her assistant speaks any Spanish. She said that it is very difficult to communicate with children and their parents who do not speak English.

Claire Garnier at Zachary Taylor Elementary

Zachary Taylor Elementary was built in 1919, yet has had recent major renovations. It is a specialty school in the district with an arts integration theme. The halls have been painted with beautiful murals, and in one part of the main hallway a quilt created by students hangs on the wall. The student population of this school is somewhat different from other schools in the district, partly because of the diverse socioeconomic groups in its catchment area, and partly because students living within the district boundaries yet attending other elementary schools may apply to attend there. Once children within Taylor's boundaries have enrolled, any remaining slots are filled by applicants who complete an interview process. Because Taylor is an arts integration school, all of the students, including those in pre-k, have regular classes in creative movement, music, art and drama.

The racial-ethnic composition for this school's student population consists of 50 % white, 32 % African American, 8 % Hispanic, 6 % American Indian, and 4 % Asian American students. While 60 % of the children in attendance qualify for free and reduced lunches, a number of attendees at the school are from two affluent neighborhoods within walking distance which contain beautiful older homes. In fact, both of these neighborhoods have been listed in the National Register of Historic

Places. Yet, just a few blocks away in another direction is a very poor neighborhood, and children from a homeless shelter attend the school as well. Because of these factors, there is more diversity in the children's socioeconomic status at Taylor than at any of the other participants' schools.

The focus of Claire Garnier's classroom is around learning centers rather than the tables where children sit. The children have large blocks of time every day to play at the centers which they select. The play is facilitated by Claire, both by how she arranges the materials in each center and by how she interacts with children while they play. Just to the left of the door is a book area, which has numerous picture books from which to choose and large bean bags for the children to curl up in. Just to the right of the book area is a parent's corner, containing a bulletin board for announcements and books about parenting that the adults may check out and read. Next to the book area are shelves with math manipulatives in clear plastic containers. The children choose materials off the shelves to play with, and only those things for the children to play with are within their reach. Teacher materials are behind the teacher's desk or put away. In the math center are small colored trays for the students to use, with a sign that reads, "No tray, no play." When the researcher visited the classroom in early December, the 4-year-olds told her what the sign said, along with other environmental print found in the room. On the other side of the classroom is a block area with numerous unit blocks. A dramatic play area with housekeeping-type props, dolls and dress-up clothes is next to the block area. Pictures of classic art are pinned up at the children's eye level in various places

around the room, but there is also "white space," or places on the walls that are not covered. A writing desk is provided for the children as well, with numerous types of paper and writing materials for them to use.

A double-sided art easel and large sand table are in the tile area near the restrooms and sink. An egg timer sits on a counter near these two learning centers. Claire explained, "We use the timer at the beginning of the year when we are learning to wait our turn." Near the egg timer, also posted at the children's eye level, are pictures and email correspondence from a classroom of young children in France. The children in the two classes email back and forth, send pictures to each other, and share what they are doing in school.

Claire, who is in her 40's, has also taught for 20 years. She has taught pre-k for 12 years, and also had the experience of starting the pre-k program at her school. Claire holds both a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and a master's degree in Child Development. She is considering earning National Board Certification, but realizes the large time commitment involved in doing that. Claire is a member of the National Association for the Educators of Young Children (NAEYC), and reads their journals on a regular basis. She teaches two sections of half-day preschool classes. However, in the afternoon she also has six kindergarteners who participate in her class by paying tuition for an extended-day program. Claire is the only pre-k teacher in her building. Her assistant, Louise, has a desk and work area to call her own. Claire speaks some Spanish and French. She converses with the Spanish speaking

children in Spanish when they have difficulty understanding what they are hearing in English.

Bev Jones at Carville Child Development Center

Another participant, Bev Jones, teaches at an off-site pre-k classroom that is held in the children's educational wing at Carville Presbyterian Church. This church also has a licensed child care center on the second floor in the same hallway as Bev's classroom. For the current school year, Bev's classroom setting is the only pre-k in the district that is off-site from an elementary building, although in past years there have been several others. The Carville Child Development Center collaborated with the public school system, Early Head Start, and other sources four years ago to improve what it offered for young children and their families and to provide funding to keep the doors open. While the collaboration with the school system has been a success, some of the otherpartnerships have ceased. Bev noted changes in the child care center's personnel and her challenge of working with different people having differing goals.

Bev's classroom is similar to Claire's in that she has learning centers throughout the room from which the children select. Environmental print labels many things throughout the room, including a hanging pocket chart with the children's pictures and names. She has the children's art work displayed at their eye level. Some of their most recent paintings decorated the housekeeping center the day the researcher conducted the initial interview. As in Claire's classroom, the materials available to the children are on low shelves that they can reach.

Bev has a wide variety of teacher materials as well, placed on high shelves to communicate to the children that they belong to the teacher. Clear gallon containers are mounted on one wall, some containing manipulatives to use in numeracy activities and others consisting of collage-type materials to use in art projects. She also has 26 clear containers, one for each letter of the alphabet, filled with small items that begin with that particular letter. Bev and her assistant, Vicki, rotate materials in the learning centers with the various stored materials to keep the children's interest high. Computers are also available for children's use, as well as a cozy library corner similar to Claire's.

On the school system's records, Bev is listed as an employee of Burton Elementary, a few blocks away. However, April Gipson, the district Child Development Administrator is the person to whom she answers, rather than the principal at Burton. Bev is a seasoned teacher, having taught for 31 years in the public schools. Throughout the years Bev has taught kindergarten, first, second, third, and fourth grades, along with combined classes of first-second and third-fourth. She has taught at this site for four years. Bev holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, and a master's degree in Language Acquisition-Early Childhood. Bev is a member of NAEYC, and also subscribes to two other educational journals.

Sylvia O'Neal at Garfield Elementary

Garfield Elementary is a new building, having been built in 2000. The facility is beautifully decorated and contains updated materials and equipment. The

library is well-supplied, and a full time librarian encourages the students to check out books. Many of these children have had little if any experience visiting the public library, and have to learn over several weeks' time what it means to check out a book and bring it back. The principal is known throughout the metropolitan area for her outstanding leadership. Both the school secretary and principal are bilingual in Spanish and English, which is important in this school community The racial -ethnic composition of the school consists of 54 % Hispanic, 31 % white, 9 % American Indian, and 6 % African American students. No Asian American children are enrolled. The school is in an impoverished area, reflected by 91.4 % of the children who qualify for free or reduced lunches. Children with limited English proficiency total 36.3 %. Eleven per cent of the children qualify for special education services.

Upon entering Sylvia O'Neal's pre-k room it seems to be bursting with materials, with little empty space on the walls or the floor, making it a little difficult to walk. In one corner of the classroom is a beautiful loft-like fort, which Sylvia's husband made. The book area under the loft has fluffy pillows lining the floor space in that area. The main focus of the room is the tables where children sit. The displayed children's work, which is hung from the ceiling above adult and child eye level, consists of pictures the children have colored and cut out. Other art work also looks teacher-directed in nature. There is a heavy focus on learning a letter of the alphabet each week, but Sylvia also uses themes such as Indians and Pilgrims around Thanksgiving.

Sylvia is in her late 30's, and has taught for 13 years. Like several of the other participants, she started a pre-k program at another school. That program closed last year as part of the district's efforts to consolidate enrollment from buildings with low enrollment. Sylvia has also taught several years in kindergarten. She has a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, and she subscribes to a teacher trade magazine that provides her with classroom ideas.

Marcie Shelton at Del Heights Elementary

Del Heights Elementary was built in 1931. As the researcher walked in for the interview appointment, there was graffiti painted on the exterior walls, yet no vandalism expense was reported for the previous year in the district-wide report. Near the graffiti-covered wall was a small rectangular flower bed with zinnias and weeds. The entrance from the school's parking lot is a small back door opening into a dark, narrow hallway, which then leads to the main hallway. The racial-ethnic composition of this school is comprised of 55 % African American, 26 % white, 15 % Hispanic, 3 % Asian, and 1 % American Indian students. This school is also in a very low socioeconomic area, with 86.1 % of the children qualifying for free or reduced lunches. Ten per cent of the students have limited English proficiency, and 11.7 % receive special education services.

Marcie Shelton's classroom is large and round in shape, located at one corner of the school building. At the time this school was built, architects typically designed the kindergarten classrooms to be circular, to pattern them after the first American kindergarten, taught on Margarethe Schurz' large round porch (Beatty,

1995). The classroom is divided into learning centers, and the activities are divided between teacher-directed and child-directed play. On one counter is a cage holding the classroom pet, a black and white guinea pig. Children's art work is displayed in the hall and in the classroom at the children's eye level. Most of the art work is teacher-structured and craft-like in nature.

Marcie is an experienced teacher who has taught pre k at this site for 12 years, and began the preschool program there. She has taught for a total of 23 years in first grade, kindergarten, a third-fourth grade combination class, and now in pre-k. Marcie holds a bachelor's degree in both Elementary and Early Childhood Education, and a Master's Degree in Elementary Education. She also subscribes to a teacher trade magazine that gives her creative teaching ideas. Marcie uses themes in her classroom.

Thus, the six participants have both challenges and assets in common. Four of the six hold Master's Degrees, and five of the six helped begin the pre-k program in the district 12 years ago. All have taught long enough to be able to identify what their experiences are like and to realize what issues are relevant. In addition, the longevity of teaching experiences of the participants enabled them to discuss whether teaching pre-k has changed over time, and if it has changed, in what ways. The following chapter discusses the textural and structural themes derived from examining the data collected from these educators.

Chapter V: Findings

The information shared by the participants about their lived experiences was examined according to phenomenological data analysis procedures (Moustakas, 1994). The beginning point, as mentioned in Chapter III, was bracketing in order to set aside prejudgments as well as to distinguish and describe all the data the participants shared. Then the information was viewed as equally important, or horizonalized. After the process of horizonalization, the statements were clustered into themes, which were the core themes of the experience, or the essences of the lived experience. The themes are described below.

The Benefits of Teaching Preschool

One of the first themes that was quite evident when looking at the data was the value the teachers saw in what they do. They recognized the benefits to the children who attend as well as the benefits to themselves in participating in such a rewarding endeavor. In describing the importance of their work, most of the participants also expressed enjoyment of their teaching preschool. During the course of the interview Lynn exclaimed, "I love getting up and going to work in the morning." Before beginning the initial recruitment interview, she was happily cleaning up from the morning group's session and enthusiastically setting out materials for the afternoon session. Lynn's demeanor was that of someone who truly enjoys her work. During the interview she elaborated, "The rewards are immeasurable. I'll never know the effects I've had on kids. But I've taught long enough now that the parents wave at me—they remember when I taught them!"

When the researcher first contacted Marcie about her experiences as a public preschool teacher, she eagerly said, “You know, what we do is so important for these little ones. They come to us knowing too much of things they should not know, and knowing too little of things that you and I did for our children without probably even thinking about it.” Marcie teaches only part-time in the afternoon, yet often spends the morning in her classroom preparing for the children. “The teachers in the higher grades tell me that they can really see a big difference in the children who have gone to pre-k. I know that my job is a very special one.”

To begin the interview at the end of a busy day, the researcher asked Claire, “What is pre-k like?” She responded, “Well, at this time of day, I will say it’s very hard work and it’s emotionally and physically and cognitively exhausting. But, it’s fascinating. It’s fun. You get lots of hugs.” One parent commented to Claire, “I wish I looked forward to going to my job like this!” Thus, her enthusiasm for her role as a pre-k teacher is evident to others who interact with her on a daily basis.

Bev also talked about how much she enjoyed her work and how she loved to try new things. “I enjoy trying different activities to help different kids. To see their eyes light up when they really understand something for the first time…there is nothing like that in the world.” Sheconcluded, “I know that what I do is important.” Sylvia said it a little differently. “If a person doesn’t enjoy doing this, then they need to go get another job. Of course, some people don’t like their jobs right now, because there’s been so much disarray in this district lately. I think it will smooth out, though.” Barbara, who seemed to be the most discouraged among the participants,

stated, “I enjoy teaching preschool and kindergarten, but every year it gets harder and harder. I can’t imagine what’s going to happen next year and the year after that, as more and more children come who are just lower and lower in their ability. I know that what we do is important, but we’ve got so many demands placed on us now. Don’t the schools know we can’t do everything?”

In Search of Quality

Another structural theme centered on problems that kept the teachers from having the type of quality in their classrooms that they wanted. Class size was a big issue for Sylvia, who reported that her room was too small and too crowded. For the other teachers, the class size seemed to be what they expected, particularly for a public school classroom. Several mentioned waiting lists for their pre-k programs, expressing concern about children who need service, but are unable to participate in preschool due to lack of classroom space at the schools. Lynn explained, “We have a waiting list long enough to fill another class. I wish there was an empty classroom so they could hire another teacher and more children could come. They need it so much.” “There are so many children who need this but can’t come,” commented Claire.

All of the current preschool classrooms enroll between 16 and 21 children, although the actual class size is limited to 20 students. In two different instances paperwork was “messed up” and an extra child was accidentally enrolled. Rather than upset the parents, the principal in each case relied on attrition to take care of the issue. In discussing class size Sylvia declared, “I heard this year they [meaning

several principals at other elementary schools in the district she had just mentioned] were going to go over the 20 student limit and just pay the penalty. My principal said, 'We are not doing it!' But I can't imagine. I really think the ideal preschool room is about 14 or 15."

The teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for professional development, another indicator of program quality. Claire stated that the district did not have funds to provide for substitutes so that teachers could participate in professional development activities during the day. In fact, one teacher took personal leave in order to be involved in a research project. Some professional development opportunities are available after school, however. Claire participated in a workshop held after school at her building on blood-borne pathogens, and Bev attended a meeting at the administrative office to develop a new pre-k report card. Most of the participants attended a two day district-wide workshop for pre-k teachers, which was part of the in-service activities the week before school started. This workshop was planned by April Gipson, the Child Development Specialist for the district who oversees the pre-k program. April also plans some professional development for the teachers throughout the year. About those meetings, however, Sylvia complained,

> April had several meetings that I wasn't able to go to, because I never got the memo about them. The only way I knew about them was my friend at another school called and was like, "Hey! Where were you? Why didn't you come to the meeting?" And then I was like, "I didn't

know about it!" I complained to my principal, but she said they didn't know about it either. So sometimes the communication breaks down and we don't hear about things until it's too late to go.

Although the researcher asked the participants during the interview about pre-k meetings, some didn't even mention them. Lynn said, "Well, we have pre-k meetings after school with April sometimes, but by the time we go through the announcements, there really isn't very much time left. I wish we could just talk to each other." Barbara stated that she doesn't even try to go to the pre-k meetings. Instead, her preference is to attend kindergarten meetings. Bev noted that often the pre-k teachers are put with the kindergarten teachers for district-wide meetings.

Interactions with Others

The idea of meetings with the kindergarten teachers and other pre-k teachers leads to another theme that developed through analyzing the data. That theme included the various interactions the participants had with other people as they worked in and out of the classroom For example, they often have discussions with the child care providers who drop off and pick up children. The participants and the child care providers do this to provide continuity of care for the children as they transition between the school and the child care facility. "Ramon wasn't very hungry today," explained Claire, as the van driver from the child care center picked up the children. "And make sure Ray's mother sees the note in his backpack."

Bev also dialogues with the people who work at the child care center housed in the same wing as her classroom. She particularly discusses behavior and guidance

ideas with the child care providers, suggesting in an informal way positive guidance techniques for them to try. She also shares supervision of the children enrolled in child care at times because of where her classroom is located in proximity to the boys' bathroom. Bev explained, "We often get to do bathroom duty [for the child care center]. There's only one toilet and one sink and several come down at once, and we are a lot of times having to go in there and help those boys who are just *so* happy to be in that bathroom!"

Teachers find themselves collaborating with other people in the community as well. Barbara described the process of asking several local businesses about possible donations for the classroom. The sink and its countertop in Barbara's classroom were in such disrepair that she could not use it, and it had become an eyesore. Barbara talked to two local hardware stores about the situation, which both willingly provided materials. Her husband provided the labor. She said, "When you work in a poor school district, you have to find ways to get what you need for your room."

At times, the interactions with others are not what the teachers feel is the best way to use their time and resources. For example, April asked some of the half-day pre-k teachers in the district to participate in a grant opportunity, but they were reticent to do so, because of the amount of time it would take. Marcie explained, "We [the part-time pre-k teachers] didn't feel like it would be fair, because it would be like we were working all day, but would only get part-time pay. I mean, if they want to do a grant and get a bunch of money for the district, then why can't we be

paid full-time for that year, but still just have one class of kids and do the grant stuff the other half day?" Marcie went on to discuss how she would like to participate in research, including several research questions she had.

Special Issues Involving Assistants

The participants also discussed the daily interactions with their assistants. All of the preschool teachers have an assistant, and in several cases the participants talked about how valuable their assistants were. Lynn felt very fortunate to have an assistant capable of translating notes for parents into Spanish. Lynn said, "If I didn't have her, I wouldn't be able to communicate with a lot of the parents since they don't speak English, and I don't speak Spanish." Lynn did go on to say, however, that some of the preschool teachers have had to work with assistants who were very difficult, or didn't understand the teacher's positive guidance techniques. As she stated, "It's really better to not have an assistant at all than one who won't cooperate with you."

Sylvia shared the plight of one preschool teacher, whose Spanish-speaking bilingual aide was sent to another school in the district. This move was made because the aide's new school needed someone who was bilingual to assist with several children there. The problem, however, was that at the new school the aide needed to speak Vietnamese. Thus, the Spanish-speaking assistant was not of much help. Fortunately, she was able to move back to a school with a high population of Spanish speaking children.

Lynn was very concerned about a new regulation that has been passed by the district. The bilingual aides must obtain 40 hours of college credit in order to retain their employment, yet will not receive a salary raise once they complete the course work. Lynn wondered how Maria, a single mother with three children, could manage to do that. "She's in a really tough spot, and I would be in an even tougher spot if she left!"

Other Teachers and Administrators

Some of the pre-k teachers collaborate with the kindergarten teacher(s), while others do not. Lynn expressed a desire to spend time talking to and collaborating with the kindergarten teacher, but said, "We have talked about it—but our planning periods are at different times and with special duties and all the other stuff we have to do, it makes it very difficult." Barbara works very closely with the kindergarten teacher who is right across the hall. They are good friends and share many ideas. However, as mentioned earlier, Barbara does not work with either the other pre-k teacher or with the preschool special education teacher. Barbara said, "Kindergarten is my love, and preschool is my hobby. I do spend most of my time on kindergarten, because that is where they have so much to learn." Claire explained that she would like to collaborate more with the kindergarten teacher. "We have had a string of several different ones," she said. The high turnover rate in kindergarten teachers, therefore, made association difficult. Marcie collaborates frequently with the three kindergarten teachers in her building. "We all work together, and it makes it really

nice to have each other to lean on, you know? I mean, we share activities and like for everyone in our corner [of the building] to be a part."

Sylvia shared several thoughts about working with others in the building. She stated,

> I've enjoyed the library at the new school. The librarian is wonderful here. She's trying to really get them involved. To a point, I miss the time with other preschool teachers. But, I learned to stay out of the teacher's lounge. The other teachers would start in about my babies and their parents. At preschool level, you really develop a relationship with the parents, because they are there more than when the children are older, 'cause when they are little they [the parents] are checking in the windows looking to see if they are ok. When they're older, the parents can leave them easier. So I just stayed in my room and then other teachers would come in and [notice that] I'd changed. I was a lot happier when I didn't hear other teachers trashing the kids. Other teachers would ask, "Are you guys talking about us?" And I said, "No, you can come in here too. Just don't trash my babies and their parents."

Most of the pre-k teachers do not seem particularly close to other teachers in the building, but this does not cause them concern. Lynn said, "Some teachers feel that pre-k is too much like babysitting rather than teaching. 'All you do is play!' they say." However, Marcie viewed the teachers of older children in a different way. "A lot of times when new teachers come in, they look at me like this," she explained,

making a grimace. "But then they begin to see what we do, how much the children learn, and the other teachers—the first and second grade teachers—they vouch for what we do. I've had to do a lot of educating over the years about how important early childhood is to the teachers of the older kids. And then they really see the value of it. I had to train my principal, too. But now she is a great support to me and to the program."

Even though each teacher has a principal, they all communicate frequently with April from the central office. April e-mails the teachers weekly and answers their questions regarding the pre-k program. "I answer to my principal for like when I'm sick or need a personal day. And I participate in the evening activities like our carnival. But I talk to April if I have a question, you know, about pre-k," explained Sylvia. Claire spoke very highly of her principal. "She understands what preschool is about and is very supportive."

The Need for Collaboration

The pre-k teachers would like more time to collaborate with each other. Several of them mentioned that they missed time just to share ideas and concerns. When the prekindergarten program was begun in this district 12 years ago, classes for the children were not held on Fridays. Instead, that day was used for home visits, meetings with other teachers, and conferences with parents. That is no longer the case, and the teachers who used to have Fridays for collaboration would like to have something like it again. "We never have time to just talk. The schools can't afford substitutes so that we can get together." Lynn said, "It's hard when you don't have

someone to bounce ideas off of. The Fridays were wonderful. We could make home visits, phone calls, and meet with each other. We are supposed to have meetings once a month, but we don't always meet, and then we have so many questions to ask April. When we have workshops, we are usually clumped in with the kindergarten teachers."

"Well, since I just work part-time, I use my mornings a lot to, you know, get things done. I talk to parents, plan, get stuff ready for the kids, and things like that. So I don't really have time to get with other teachers. Plus—they're teaching! I'm grateful for the flexibility of my schedule, but don't know how the teachers who teach full time get that other stuff done," stated Marcie.

Two of the teachers, however, feel good about collaborative interactions with other professionals and teachers. Claire and Bev both noted during the interviews that they call other pre-k teachers and share ideas. They have their own network of support. Claire did mention that it would be beneficial to be connected with mentors to assist her and others as they prepare for National Board Certification in Early Childhood. She explained,

> We have a mentoring program, and the mentors are anyone who is already certified, or have turned all their stuff in and are waiting for their scores. The last time we met, there were like 12 people there working on their Early Childhood generalist [certification], and there was only one mentor there. And she didn't have her scores back yet, so she didn't know if she was telling us the right thing or not. She was very encouraging and

positive, but didn't know what to tell us. If there were a program where mentors could get college credit for being a mentor that might be really helpful. It's hard for people to connect up as mentors and mentorees. But I don't know how you would do that. It seems like the state office that has all the information could do that.

Curricular Issues

At the beginning of the school year, April Gipson distributed several documents to the teachers at their district-wide in-service meeting. This large urban school district took the newly-designed pre-k standards adopted by the state's Department of Education, and created a document for the 4-year-old program entitled "Course Syllabus: Approaches to Learning, Grade Pre-K" (public school district, 2003)[2]. The skills listed are described as the basic skills for pre-k. Additionally, the skills are meant to be used by the pre-k teachers in planning their activities, and are described in the document published by the district as "developing curriculum appropriate to the needs of their students."

The document gives nine basic guidelines that Early Childhood Programs (pre-k classrooms in the district) should follow:

1. Provide curriculum that builds upon what children already know and are able to do to enable them to connect new concepts and skills.
2. Provide units or themes of interest that integrate and teach all areas of the core curriculum (e.g., foreign languages, language arts including reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts).

3. Provide a literacy-rich environment arranged in learning centers or learning areas (e.g. art center, science center, reading center, dramatic play center, and block center). Each center will have a variety of activities for the children. This arrangement allows for a wide range of developmental interest and abilities within the same classroom.
4. Provide exposure to a wide variety of information and literacy experiences and the use of technology through daily activities in the classroom and /or media center.
5. Provide a safe environment designed for the developmental needs of the age group served and implemented with attention to the needs and differences of the individual children.
6. Provide a climate that is active; one in which children interact with each other and materials while engaging in cooperative hands-on learning with day-to-day life experiences.
7. Provide a balance of classroom activities that are teacher-directed and child-directed activities. These activities may be active or quiet, performed individually or in large and small groups.
8. Provide an environment that is sensitive to cultural, language, and learning differences among all children served.
9. Provide an on-going process of collecting information from multiple sources about a child's needs, which may include observation, portfolios, screenings,

> etc., to determine an individual's strengths and weaknesses in order to plan his/her educational services. (Public school, 2003)[2]

When asked about curriculum, all of the participants discussed this document and made a copy of it for the researcher. However, when questioned about curriculum further, a wide array of responses emerged.

Lynn stated,

> Every year the children seem lower [in their capabilities]. There are so many demands placed on us from the school system, so many demands that it's impossible to meet them all. Our curriculum is based on the new state standards for pre-kindergarten. Our district took these standards, and told us that was what we were to teach. There is a real inconsistency between the schools of what is taught in pre-k. We have suggestions, but we do also have academic freedom. Plus, in pre-k a lot of our curriculum at the beginning of the year is just going through routines.

Marcie said, "We have standards that we got this year. We've also got *Phonics and Friends*©" (Hampton Brown, 2001). Several others showed the researcher the *Phonics and Friends*© kit. All of the participants who mentioned the literacy supplement kit shared Marcie's observation, "The children really like the songs that go with each story. They just *love* the songs." This kit is a set of materials containing whole language components such as big books and sets of smaller books for the children to read. Additionally, each book and the accompanying song are dedicated to a letter of the alphabet and the sound(s) the

letter makes. Sylvia said, "April gave us the *Phonics and Friends*© curriculum and I didn't want to use it. But then I thought, 'Ok,' and I use it because I like to do a letter of the week. I used to start at the beginning of the year, but we had so many breaks, I was just reviewing all the time, so now I start after Christmas. We don't get through the whole alphabet, but at least they learn some of it."

"Sometimes wonderful things happen like this year, when one of the grandmothers had a wonderful idea," explained Claire. "She is going to help each child make a quilt square about themselves, and then is going to sew the squares together into a quilt. Some classes have done this in the past, and you know everyone learns so much about each other and working together in a classroom community. The children come to understand the ways we are alike and the ways we are different. We talk about a lot of things as we put our quilt pieces together. Other years there may be another special project that we can do, based on what things parents and grandparents can share."

In other curricular areas, such as math, there is no commercial curriculum the teachers are expected to use. Therefore, each teacher decides what is best for her to teach. Marcie said, "We don't have a math curriculum kit, so I plan it myself." And Barbara stated, "For math, we're just kind of on our own." Sylviaexplained , "For math, they kind of leave it up to you to do a lot of it. We have a checklist and we have the standards to tell us what math should be covered. At one of the schools I went to (I started the program at Brown) and I had no supplies—just some old blocks. So I've had to do math things pretty much on my own all along."

Sylvia said, “We start our day with puzzles or books, like they have to learn not to hold the books upside down, left to right and stuff. At the beginning they just look at the pictures. It gives me time to set up stuff the way it needs to be. And I know some teachers don’t like puzzles, but I do. I think it teaches them responsibility, you know, keeping up with all the pieces. Plus it teaches them shapes. In a few weeks we’ll start the session with journaling, where they will come in and find their name and copy their name. If they know that, then they will work on their last name, and then we move in to shapes or alphabet letters. There’s no pressure. They get a sticker when they are finished. This week our theme is “triangle” and so we have a lesson and then learning centers. I try to have a center set up for energetic boys like a bean bag toss.”

The creative arts were taught in a variety of ways in the participants’ classrooms, from very structured teacher-directed work, as described earlier in Barbara and Sylvia’s classes to child-initiated tempera paintings at an easel in Claire and Bev’s classrooms. In between these teacher-directed and child-created artistic endeavors were the activities found in Marcie and Lynn’s classrooms. Marcie was using the thematic approach with her children, and cut out shapes of cars, boats, and airplanes. The children could then paint on the cut out shapes. Lynn had a similar activity, in which she cut out shapes of ducks, and the children could sponge paint them yellow.

For the most part music consisted of singing songs at circle time, including songs from the cassette tape that went with the *Phonics and Friends*© kit. All of the

preschool classes went to music at least once per week, except for Bev's class. She planned music activities on her own in the classroom.

Core Knowledge

"About 60 % of the teachers [at Pecan Hill] use *Core Knowledge*©," declared Barbara. *Core Knowledge*© is a commercially prepared curriculum used by several of the teachers, working in elementary schools named as *Core Knowledge*© schools. Yet even though Barbara's school is listed as a *Core Knowledge*© school, she explained that she had to spend all of her time teaching skills, so did not use it.

Bev explained,

> … [I]n the public school system, one thing that I've always liked about it is that there is always a set curriculum. In the first year, there was not a set curriculum. But I've always been a proponent of the *Core Knowledge*© (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1991). So, in the beginning I got the proposed preschool *Core Knowledge*© [curriculum] and I spent that first year putting it all in sequence. I didn't know they were working on that nationally, and if I'd just waited, they would have done it. Then the next year, I found out there was a new preschool set of *Core Knowledge*© materials! Mine was just about the way they did it. But it was really nice that it was there and that it validated what we did. As a state we had a body of skills that were to be learned, but we didn't have a curriculum. And that's a good thing, because there are good policies and good procedures that good teachers use, but there are so many seasonal things that naturally occur, and I am glad that I have the

> freedom to move those things in the curriculum around and make it work. I'm glad I don't have to do Columbus Day, because my goodness, we did that for years. I think it's more important that we talk about safety, about personal safety. So I like the public school having a set of skills that we all have in common so we are all on the same page.

Claire described what her curriculum was like.

> At our school we use *Core Knowledge*© curriculum. Now I have to try and cram all the three-year-old year curriculum and all the four-year-old curriculum into one year, because I have all the kids together. And so I leave a few things out, but it's pretty doable since you can always adjust. Plus, some of things we learn are really on a continuum. It may not look like it the way they are written, but they really are and so people are doing things at their own level. I like *Core Knowledge*© Preschool Curriculum. It's not like the other *Core Knowledge*©. The other *Core Knowledge*© is strictly "Learn these facts!" But preschool is like, we learn to follow directions, learn to talk back and forth in conversations, things like that. So I really like using the *Core Knowledge*©. And then we are free to plan our own curriculum and I do. At the preschool [level] everybody does what they want to.

Marcie explained that her school is considered a *Core Knowledge*© school, and that she has been through training to teach the curriculum. She further explained

that she does use that curriculum, and in looking at her lesson plans, she covers themes and activities that she feels the children are ready for, and

> …When *Core Knowledge*© fits in, then I use it. What I've had to start doing this year, just because they have given us a set curriculum that we have to do, I've started plugging in to my lesson plans what I do that is 'core'. So I just basically put down what our lesson's about, what we're going to do in our centers and then I plug in where I'm teaching what. I make Core [Knowledge] fit what I know my kids need."

Getting Children "Ready"

All of the participants said something about the pressure to teach so much in preschool. Sylvia said, "I believe that the push of paper and pencil in the preschool class is growing. I feel that people are forgetting that this is a developmental program and it needs to be treated as such." She also explained that at her former school, about one third of the parents were incarcerated. She said that there was not pressure at that school to get children to achieve, indicating that the lack of pressure at Brown Elementary was unusual. In the comments section of her survey, Bev wrote,

> Public preschool programs are under great pressures to prepare children for kindergarten and beyond. In fact, this responsibility has been passed from parents to the school for too many children in urban and depressed areas. In addition, emphasis is placed on phonics not phonemic awareness; on facts, not reflections of observations;

> on skills mastered, not skill growth; on behavior management, not children making decisions and managing their own behavior. Fortunately, the new, young, well-prepared teachers have the knowledge to manage all of these issues. They (the new teachers) need supportive administrators *or* they need to educate them.

She then added almost parenthetically, "Society impacts this a lot."

Barbara said,

> I do not feel our curriculum is monitored whatsoever. I know I teach what is needed, but no one *ever* evaluates or observes what is actually being taught. Every year it is getting harder—it's depressing. I wonder what is going to happen next year. Some people teach in [thematic] units, but I teach skills. The standards are so high; I don't have a lot of time for them to just have sharing time. So I just teach the basics, not the extra stuff.

Barbara went on to discuss how little some of the children know when they come to pre-k, and what programs can get them "ready" for the 4-year-old classroom. "I can tell which children go to which day cares, and I can tell who went to Head Start. The kids who went to Head Start are really ahead in fine motor skills." Claire said, "[Preschool pressure] is increasing. It is *much* worse at the kindergarten level. With the intense push toward an even more academic kindergarten, an equal push on preschool seems just around the corner. Many preschool teachers already are too academic—or try to be, with lots of worksheets,

etc. and not enough play." And Marcie summed up the discussion regarding school pressure by saying, "Every year my children are expected to learn more and more."

Sylvia explained,

> 'Cause it's like, well, I was taught in Early Childhood [classes to] keep the paper and pencil as much out of there as possible and no worksheets, and then they hand you this phonics workbook, and I'm like, "Am I supposed to run these off?" Of course, at the end of the year, after Christmas, I do things to teach them the letters, but at the beginning of the year, I just don't think that's a good idea. I do a letter a week, you know, and like they learn the big A and little a, but there's no negativity about it. I just draw a happy face on there, you know, so they will feel good about it. My old assistant, you know we split up when our old school closed, she said the new teacher was a kindergarten teacher who came down to preschool and it's obvious. She's trying to do kindergarten work with them. I just can't believe it!

Another purpose of the public preschool in this district mirrors the national trend to get children "ready for kindergarten," as all of the participants mentioned at some point in the interview, although none agreed with that purpose. "Every year we are expected to do more and more, and the children come knowing less and less," exclaimed Lynn. Bev explained, "There is such a push in kindergarten for the children to be able to do what used to be expected of them in the first grade. Now we are being expected to do what used to be done in kindergarten." An example of

this trend is a first grade teacher in another school district who was told recently they would have no more recess and no crayons in the classroom (personal communication, May, 2004). Marcie stated, "There is just a pressure to teach them all this stuff that they aren't ready for, and that is just wrong, wrong, wrong. Some of these little ones haven't ever even had a book read to them, and somehow I'm supposed to make sure they know the entire alphabet—upper and lower case by the end of the year."

Resources and Equipment

The teachers all seem to work well with the resources and equipment they are given. Although most of them do work in older buildings, the challenges of the older buildings did not seem to be an issue, except for repeated comments about mice being a problem. Concerning resources, Sylvia explained,

> I've learned that the money is not going to be there. I've bought a lot of materials when I've needed them. My husband made a lot of my shelves and my fort. Puzzles I've accumulated over the years. Some of it I got at thrift stores, but even now when I find something I just get it. I have three rooms full of stuff at my father-in-law's office. You just have to accept when you work in a poor district to buy it yourself or do without.

The other participants made similar comments concerning accumulating things on their own. Bev explained, "I've just accumulated so many things over the years. And, of course, I have to save it *all*, because I never know when I might need it." "The principal tries so hard to keep our building up, but I know it's hard," stated

Lynn. "Some of the schools are really run down, though. I think a lot of it depends on your principal.

Working with Families

Bev started her discussion about working with parents by saying, "Well, one of the things I like about it [teaching preschool] is that the parents accept that it is school. And that's one of the big challenges here, is that the day care parents do not separate me from the day care. In a school setting it's almost more formal," she said. The teachers all had something to share about working with families. Marcie's comments from the survey included even broader ideas. She stated,

> "Education needs to be a priority within our families, our state, and our country. Parents need to be willing and prepared to accept responsibility for the development and nurture of their children long before they are old enough for public education. We need to educate parents. Parenting children is an awesome responsibility. We as teachers, need the help and commitment from parents long before we receive them in our public schools. With that help, the task would mean success for all of us."

Addressing the Needs of Children from Families in Distress

Claire said, "Many of the students who *really* need preschool don't have transportation. The children from the shelter particularly could benefit *so* much from it." (There is no mid-day transportation available, particularly for children from the homeless shelter.) Claire has spent extra time trying to make transportation

arrangements so that children from the homeless shelter can attend. In discussing with Lynn about the poverty her students live in, she explained,

> Well, the school building may be kind of old, although they try to keep it up as much as they can. But this is the Taj Mahal compared to the children's homes! Their homes that I've seen when I've made home visits are just so awful. It's hard to believe kids have to live like that…The parents seem younger every year. We really have to educate the parents. But the parents here are really involved. They try to participate a lot. They care and they really try. But also there are so many other problems for parents. Like there are several of the moms that are being abused by their husbands. And that's really hard to know that that's going on.

Sylvia gave details regarding her experiences with families of her students.

> At the last school I taught pre-k at, probably half of my kids had a parent in jail. I can't imagine having to go and see your mom in jail on the weekend, and that being the only time you get to see her. And here a lot of kids are being raised by their grandparents. It upsets me the most what's going on at home and that I can't do anything about it.

Bev also shared, "You know, this school system serves so many children who are so very poor. They need so much." "There is a real challenge you face in finding out about the children—their backgrounds." Barbara said, "With a large majority of Hispanics, they are limited [in participation] due to language. They do not feel comfortable working with us. It makes it hard for us to help them."

The participants in this study all work with some children exposed to all the aforementioned risk factors, including children with disabilities. Claire said, "Sometimes you have to bend over backwards to get children [needing testing for a developmental delay] the help they need." Bev had one child with possible disabilities transferred to her classroom from another school in the district. "The parents know me, because I had their older child several years ago," she explained, "and the teacher at [the former school] just couldn't handle Jason. So they asked if I had room for one more. I will probably refer him for testing pretty quickly, but it could have just been the teacher, too. A lot of children really have problems in her classroom."

Communication with Families

The written communication that participants shared with the researcher consisted of numerous notes and newsletters sent home to the parents. Other one-way teacher-to-parent communication included the district's "Pre-K Handbook," which explained school policies regarding the pre-k program, school calendars, and a snack calendar for an individual classroom. A content analysis of the teacher-to-parent written communication showed the majority of the communication concerned activities taking place. Every teacher expressed a strong desire to communicate with the families in every way possible. Claire uses email with some parents, but acknowledged that not all parents have email access, and that the parents who do communicate to Claire through email are also the parents who attend Open House and come up to school to talk to her frequently.

Bev described the process of building rapport with families. She explained,

> …And the thing I like about that [teaching preschool] is that I get to be the teacher who sets the tone for the parents, for the school's relationship with the parents. And I think that's really, really important thatthe parents learn to work with the child to help them learn the responsibility, I mean, for a 4-year-old, all the responsibility lies with the parent. But the parents 'get' the program: bringing back materials, getting all your materials, coming on time, picking up on time. And *that's* a big one. But parents know I care about them and their children. Parents know they can trust me."

Communication Regarding Assessment

The school district has a new pre-k report card that April developed along with a committee of pre-k teachers, one of whom was Bev. The new report card was written to match the new district standards. "There are so many words on this report card, I'm afraid parents are going to have a hard time reading it," declared Barbara. "I am required to sign off on the back, saying that these things are based on what I have seen," said Marcie. "What if it's something I haven't actually seen, but I just *know* the child can do it? I mean it's like now we are going to be on the hook for seeing to it that all the kids can do all this stuff."

To communicate the children's progress to the parents, Bev takes digital photographs showing the children engaging in the expected skills, along with the children's work samples. She then used these photos in a power point presentation about the child during parent-teacher conferences. The parents enjoy seeing specific

examples of their children's work, and are able to see growth over time. All of the teachers have parent-teacher conferences with the parents, and all keep folders containing samples of the children's work to use at those conferences. Other ways teachers assess and communicate that assessment to parents is bycollecting authentic data using anecdotal records, checklists, and rating scales. Marcie keeps a portfolio for behavioral issues only and documents behavior problems using anecdotal records.

The Challenges of Differing Home Languages

As indicated in the demographic description in Chapter IV, there are numerous languages represented in the student population. However, although the district's website reports 50 languages spoken in children's home environments. Spanish is the most common native language spoken in student's homes. Yet Spanish may not be as prevalent as at least one participant believes.

The school district reports thatPecan Hill Elementary has a Hispanic population of 26 %. But Barbara commented on her survey, "The current enrollment tends to have 80-90 % Hispanic speaking classes. Being that I do not speak Spanish, I spend much of my day teaching language. This tends to delay some of the opportunities to teach pre-reading skills. It is harder to keep their attention at all levels since their English language is so limited."

All of the participants' classrooms are English-language classrooms. Claire and Bev know some Spanish and can converse with the Spanish-speaking children when necessary. Lynn has an assistant who speaks Spanish, but noted in the

interview that not every teacher who needs a Spanish-speaking assistant has one. Furthermore, children who bring other home languages to the classroom do not always have someone to translate for them on a regular basis.

Lynn stated,

> Many of the families have just come from Mexico, and they don't really want to learn English. And sometimes when I send a note home, it's the older siblings that are reading and signing the note. I know that the language is part of the reason why the children are lower every year, but that's not all of it. Our school just got put on the at-risk schools—and we have so many ESL and IEP students. We haven't changed anything here at school, but now we're "high risk", mainly because so many children don't speak English. And so now I'm expected to do all this stuff so we can get off the high-risk list. But I can only do so much.

"In my classroom I would say probably half, maybe 60 % speak Spanish," replied Sylvia. "Because of budget crunches, we don't have as many bilingual aides as we used to. I wish they had more, because the kids get more out of it. But the kids learn a lot—they start understanding—it's just getting it out of them. They don't talk much. In fact, sometimes they go a long time not saying anything. And they laugh at me when I try to say their names because I can't roll my r's."

The pre-k report card has been printed in the three most commonly found home languages in the district in an attempt to reach parents. "I think it must have a high readability rate, but it is available for parents in English, Spanish or

Vietnamese, and that's a good thing," added Marcie. "So if they [the parents] can read well, at least the report card is in their language, assuming it's one of those three languages. But this is a big problem." she continued. "The schools really need to address this. With all the different languages, there's the problem of the teacher and child not understanding each other, and then the parents and teacher not communicating well. Then, it takes longer for the child to understand what they need to learn in pre-k."

Summary

The public preschool teachers who agreed to participate in this study have a number of textural themes that describe their individual experience in and out of the classroom. Textural themes included Barbara's frustration with the pressure she feels in not speaking any Spanish, and Bev's interest in curriculum and assessment. Sylvia had an interesting textural theme of learning to deal with gossip about her children and their families in the teacher's lounge. How each teacher views and implements the standards are all different, and thus each explanation carries its own theme that explains the texture, or the essence of the individual's perception of the life experience of what curriculum means to her (Moustakas, 1994).

The structural themes, such as the benefits for the children and teachers of pre-k and the search for quality, have developed from the entire group. Other structural themes include these: (a) interactions with others, (b) curricular issues, (c) the readiness pressure, (d) working with families, and (e) the challenges of differing home languages. How these textural and structural themes fit against the backdrop

of the conceptual framework and the research cited in the literature review is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI: Discussion and Implications

Every year children across the United States enter formal public schooling for the first time. While kindergarten used to be that milestone--the new experience--many children, along with their families, are now first introduced to this thing called "school" as 4-year-olds when they go to pre-kindergarten. This changeof when young children begin to attend public school is happening at an increasing rate. From the existing research, it is evident that high quality preschool makes a difference in the lives of children. Research has also established that well-educated teachers who are highly satisfied with their jobs play a part in having high quality preschool. Further research has shown that teachers need opportunities for professional growth and collaboration with others. Yet there has been a gap in the research concerning public preschool teachers' professional experiences.

In reviewing the research for this phenomenological study, as well as analyzing the collected data, it is evident that public preschool teachers find themselves in a context of rapidly changing ideas. Therefore, in order to learn more about what the teachers were experiencing, this study questioned the lived experience of public preschool teachers. To answer the research question of what is the lived experience of the public preschool teacher, the phenomenological methodology utilized in-depth interviews and other data.

The findings articulated in Chapter V answered this research question and illuminated the context of public preschool teachers' professional lives. Taken together, the individual (textural) and group (structural) themes center on two large

issues: (1) the purposes of public preschool, and (2) the role of the public preschool teacher. These two large issues, which allow organization of the themes reported in Chapter V in a way that assists in understanding (Moustakas, 1994), are powerful tools for seeing the missing puzzle piece concerning public preschool teachers, as well as suggesting needs for further research. These two large issues also show how the themes fit against the backdrop of the conceptual framework and the research cited in the literature review.

The Purposes of Public Preschool

The purposes of public preschool emerged as structural themes from analysis of the data of the benefits of preschool, curricular issues, the pressure for readiness, and working with families. All of these structural themes interconnect to show that pre-k in the district where the participants work was implemented and continues to be offered in order to help children at risk for school failure achieve later success in school. Another purpose experienced by all of the teachers is the pressure to get children "ready" for the next set of things they need to learn. For some preschool teachers, such as Barbara and Sylvia, this means teaching the children a set of skills and facts and using "happy faces" when children elicit appropriate behaviors. These are examples of teachers whose personal theorizing embraces behaviorism. For others, such as Claire and Bev, it means helping children construct knowledge about their world. Constructivism is evident in their room arrangement, art work, and working with parents in a dialogical relationship. These findings show what both Graue (1993) and Wesley and Buysse (2003) articulated, that the phrase "getting

children ready" has a number of meanings. It appears after looking at the themes that emerged from this phenomenological study that a teacher's definition of readiness is a window to use in viewing what Connelly and Clandinin (1996) referred to as the teacher's personal practical knowledge.

In the decade since Graue (1993) published her research, readiness, and the concepts associated with it, such as screening, retention, "waiting a year," and "the gift of time," are still issues for kindergarten. But as four-year-old programs have taken their place as the new introduction into formal schooling, readiness and its related concepts have become issues in pre-kindergarten as well. A study with pre-k teachers, similar to Wesley and Buysse's (2003) focus groups regarding readiness might provide more interesting information on this pressure that teachers feel. Additionally, a replication of Graue's research in pre-k settings would be valuable to teachers in the field as they use their own concepts of readiness to plan and implement activities with their children. One commonly seen by-product of the urgency to get children ready is a reduction of early childhood activities to learning a set of facts (Graue, 1993). Some teachers see this as the only way for children to be successful.

Helping At-Risk Children Achieve Success

A major purpose of public preschool in the school district used in this research was intervention for young children at risk for school failure. As mentioned in Chapter II, according to the National Study Panel on Education Indicators (1991), at risk children include children living in poverty, English language learners, and

those who have been diagnosed with a disability or developmental delay. The two main groups of at-risk children taught by the participants are impoverished children and children with limited English proficiency. However, data analysis from this research also indicated that all the teachers are struggling as they work with children who are developing below typical norms cognitively, motorically, social-emotionally and in language development. Yet while the participants discussed the first two groups of at-risk children, there was less sense of purpose of public preschool being a starting point for inclusion of children with disabilities.

The reason for this could be that there are other supports available for the children with special needs. Those diagnosed with disabilities or developmental delays in this school district are still primarily being serviced by special education teachers in self-contained early childhood special education classrooms. Would a developmentally-delayed child's attendance in a pre-k classroom be as beneficial as his attendance in a special education class? Do children who attend pre-k receive needed services faster than those who do not attend pre-k? Further study to address these two questions would be interesting. It would also be important, because research says thatthere is an especially strong association between poverty and poor social, cognitive, and academic outcomes for children who are exposed to multiple risks (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Hart & Risley, 1995; Kaiser & Delaney, 1996). Therefore, the research would be important to inform professionals of best practice related to preschoolers with special needs.

To Teach Children a Set of Facts

Barbara and Sylvia both viewed teaching as a way for children to learn a set of facts, while Claire, Bev, Marcie and Lynn saw their purpose as helping children construct knowledge about their world. Bev uses *Core Knowledge*© and strongly supports the curriculum model. In addition, three of the participants in this study, Claire, Marcie, and Barbara, teach at a school committed to being a "*Core Knowledge*© School." A criterion for a school to have this title is that teachers must agree to use 50 percent of their day for *Core Knowledge*© content (Core Knowledge© Foundation, 2004).

The underlying concept of this model is that a balanced core of common knowledge and skills is important for all students. The program is based on Hirsch's ideas that a national curriculum would contribute to fairness for all children and remedy social inequities of disadvantaged children who did not have the "intellectual capital" (Hirsch, 1996, p. 2).

> The Core Knowledge Foundation explains the preschool curriculum. [It] is a set of model guidelines describing fundamental competencies and specific knowledge that, for children from three to five years of age, can provide a solid, coherent foundation for later learning in kindergarten and beyond…Only by explicitly specifying the competencies and knowledge that all children should share can we guarantee equal access to those competencies and knowledge" (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2004).

Understandably, Hirsch's ideas have come under considerable scrutiny by some (constructivists), and have been heralded by others (behaviorists). Hirsch stated that children are disadvantaged if they come to school from a different culture and therefore don't know all of the things that the privileged children know. Conversely, Moll's (1992) work concerning funds of knowledge validated the rich amount of knowledge that young children bring to the classroom, even though that knowledge may not be the same as the one belonging to the dominant culture.

Hirsch also believed that a common culture should be promoted through the core curriculum in support of democracy. He stated, "…benefits conferred by…civilization entail the pain of some cultural loss" (1992, p. 2). A common criticism concerning the *Core Knowledge*© curriculum is asked as the question, "Whose *Core Knowledge* is it?" (Buras, 1999, p. 88). That question can certainly be raised in this school system that cares for children from such diverse backgrounds.

The *Core Knowledge*© Curriculum is a stable group of facts that is sometimes changed by the addition of newly discovered information. Using this curriculum in the way teachers are trained to do is an example of the cultural transmission ideology described by Kohlberg and Mayer (1972). However, the participants do not use the curriculum model as it is described by either the foundation or the critics. While several of the teachers use *Core Knowledge*©, they use discernment in doing so. In fact, the participants who seemed to be more constructivist in their own personal practical knowledge used *Core Knowledge*©, while the two most didactic participants did not.

To Help Children Construct Knowledge about Their World

A textural theme with all of the participants except for Barbara was that part of the purpose of preschool was to help children construct knowledge about the world around them as they played with other children and participated with the teacher in activities. While this is not only the purpose of the preschool, it is an integral part of the teacher's role.

The Role of the Preschool Teacher

The preschool teachers who shared their lives through this research all felt the great importance of what they do. They know that they are making a difference in the lives of children and their families with whom they work. The participants also value their practice of having warm interactions with the children and their families. A characteristic of the teachers is their understanding that they belong to a profession, and that several of their roles center on the professionalism of their work: (1) their qualifications, (2) a sense of belonging to the elementary school culture, and (3) a desire for more collaboration and professional development opportunities. They also experience working with a large group of children, 20 per class, and an assistant. This means that the actual number of children and families with whom they must be familiar usually total 40, since most of them have full morning and afternoon classes. Teachers also must prepare the learning environment, which includes the classroom arrangement, lesson plans, the daily schedule, and setting the interpersonal tone for the classroom. This is a part of what Connelly and Clandinin called, "the experienced curriculum" (1996, p. 99).

Making a Difference in the Lives of Children and Their Families

Findings of several longitudinal studies indicate long term benefits for young children attending high quality early childhood programs, (Campbell, et al.., 2001; Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Reynolds, et al., 2001; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) particularly when the children are at risk due to poverty. All of the research participants discussed their students and the abject poverty in which many of them live. All of the teachers also spoke of the realization of how valued they are as educators in these children's lives, and for the role they play in their students' families' well-being. The understanding the teachers have about the importance of their mission in working with children in the inner city was inspiring. At the close of her interview, Lynn said that she would like to see if what they are doing "really does make a difference down the line." To determine this, further research is needed using a longitudinal study on the benefits of public preschool education for 4-year-olds. A study similar to the Henry (2002) study from Georgia would be beneficial, provided randomization and other methodological concerns were ameliorated.

Swap (1993) stated that a strong home-school partnership is now a necessity in our society due to recent changes in community structures. All of the participants realized and spoke of their commitment to working with families, mentioning how important it was. As Frede (1998) mentioned, the kind of parental involvement in which the teacher and parent both shared information about the child with each other was the most beneficial, in that it improved interactions between the parent and child, and helped the teacher understand the child better. Most of the participants

shared touching stories about children and their families, and all of the teachers relate to parents in various ways according to Epstein's (1992) six major types of parental involvement. They all assisted families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, and ways to arrange the home environment to support learning through their newsletters, books the parents could check out, and through information provided at parent-teacher conferences. These activities also showed ways the teachers communicated with families regarding school activities on a regular basis. There were also several instances of teachers collaborating with people in the community, such as Claire's communication with the van driver for the child care center. These teachers were all aware that a home school partnership enhances the child's success in school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993), and went about working on that home-school partnership.

A great deal of research has been conducted concerning what constitutes "high quality" in early childhood classrooms (Maxwell, et al., 2001; Phillips, et al., 2000). Warm teacher-child interactions are present in programs that are beneficial. The researcher did not see these teachers interacting with the children on a broad basis, but did observe teachers working with children who were still in the classroom after school waiting to be picked up. On the day of the interview, for example, Bev had a child waiting for a parent who had to be called three times to come and get her. Bev was warm and caring with the child, realizing that it was not the child's fault.

The researcher visited Marcie's classroom during the day, and saw Marcie engaging in many positive teacher-child interactions. She worked with the children

on a project together and listened attentively to each child. Before class one of her students confided in her about a family tragedy that had occurred the evening before. At another time, when the researcher was visiting Claire's classroom, she watched as Claire explained the rules patiently to a child who had difficulty remembering them, and helped all the children transition to and from activities. Claire maintained an exceptional balance between helping the children when they needed her help, and standing back when they could do something independently.

The initial recruitment interview with Lynn took place during the lunch hour, and children were in and out of the room to drop off notes, pick up things they had left, and other tasks. Lynn was calm and helpful while she was also preparing for the afternoon group. Barbara's interview took place at the end of a field trip, and as she helped children who were late being picked up, she was very patient, although it had been a hectic day for everyone. All of the participants had a warm, respectful demeanor in interacting with the children. The researcher observed quick hugs at the end of the day, both from current and former students. This interaction always tells a bystander that a teacher loves and is loved.

To Belong to a Profession They Enjoy

Most of the teachers also commented that they truly enjoy their work, even though there are major challenges. Claire probably summed up this structural theme when she said, "Teaching preschool is wonderful!" Not all of the teachers shared that exuberance however. Barbara, for example, understands the value of preschool attendance, but is very discouraged, to the point that she shared a possible career

change in the near future. Given these findings, further research is needed to determine if enthusiastic teachers who see value in their work and believe others see value in it as well are more effective than teachers who are similar to discouraged Barbara. Additionally, a longitudinal study is needed to see how the participants grew to have the feelings they have about pre-k and how those feelings may be changing because of the constant pressure they are feeling to get children ready for something else. The emotional growth progression thatteachers experience over time would be interesting to consider.

To Be Highly Qualified

Teacher qualifications are also an aspect of quality (Frede, 1995), and the six participants are all highly educated for their positions. Four of the teachers hold Master's Degrees, and all six have a degree in Early Childhood Education or a related field. Yet the large amount of early childhood education preparation shared by the participants in this study is interesting to think about when looking at the frustrations that they shared concerning pressure to help children "be ready." Consider a teacher who finds her way into a pre-k classroom through alternative certification offered by this state's licensure laws. The teachers with strong early childhood education backgrounds found this population of children challenging. How much greater of a challenge might the students be for alternatively certified teachers without strong early childhood education backgrounds? Future research comparing early childhood classroom teachers who obtained alternative certification with those who earned a degree in early childhood education might illuminate this

issue even further. A replication of this study in other states where the teacher qualifications are different might also be informative.

To Be a Part of the Elementary School Culture

In the initial stages of this study, the researcher posed a question regarding whether pre-k teachers felt marginalized from other teachers in the building. There was also a question whether teachers like Bev, who work at an off-site setting, felt especially marginalized. Were they not seen as "real teachers," either because they teach preschool or do not teach at the elementary school building? In a pilot study several teachers reported feeling loneliness and isolation. However, findings from this study indicated pre-k teachers feel as much a part of the participant culture of the elementary school as they want to be. Even Bev, who teaches in an off-site classroom, feels very much a part of the school system. As she stated, "…what we do sets the tone that this is *real* school." In all of the interviews, the participants spoke as though they belonged to the public school system and the participant culture of the elementary school in which they work. Yet, there was also a sense of individuality about the participants, in that they did not have to spend a large amount of time conversing with other teachers. They had a sense of uniqueness about their role. Why some teachers in the pilot expressed isolation, while these participants did not would be interesting to study further.

To Have Opportunities for Collaboration and Professional Development

The teachers would like to have more opportunities to work with other teachers horizontally, such as other preschool teachers, and vertically, such as

teachers in the higher grades. The district-wide meetings for pre-k teachers are too seldom as well as too tightly scheduled for them to share ideas, work on projects together, and get feedback from others on particular challenges. Bev, Claire, Lynn, and Marcie all mentioned calling other teachers when they felt as though they needed someone to talk to. Barbara and Sylvia did not. Therefore, a chat room, or possibly a regularly-scheduled time to collaborate might be helpful.

Espinosa (2002) found opportunities for personal and professional growth to include paid leave to attend professional meetings, encouragement to participate in action research, support in being involved in professional organizations, and time to interact with others who also teach in similar settings. Scarr et al. (1994) also found that teachers need time to reflect on what they do and to collaborate with other teachers with whom they work. Activities in which the preschool teachers can work with the kindergarten and higher grade teachers are helpful for the teachers' professional growth, reminding them of the big picture as children develop and grow. The participants indicated that they do not have the time set aside, or the financial resources they desired for professional growth. During the most recent school year, substitutes were not available for teachers to attend professional development activities. Further study is needed to indicate what types of professional development are the most rewarding for teachers. This question would be well-suited for an action research project.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The physical environment, including room arrangement, materials and activities available to the children had some variation, as seen in the classroom descriptions in Chapter IV. These variations not only indicate what materials are provided by the district, but also give the observer a view of the teacher's ideology of learning. Should activities be child directed or teacher-directed activities? Should the room be decorated with papers that look "nice" on display, or should the walls reflect that the classroom belongs to a community of learners? Is the children's behavior managed by a token economy system, or does the teacher provide direct and indirect guidance that encourages the children's developing self control?

Other features related to a quality environment that the teacher cannot control includes a fiscal aspect of care, including the upkeep of facilities (McWilliam, deKruif & Zulli, 2002; Phillips, et al., 2000). Frustrations over mice in the classrooms were mentioned often enough that it should be addressed by the school administration. Other factors related to upkeep of facilities, such as weeds and peeling paint should be addressed as well, and could possibly be handled by a parent or community group.

Educational Ideologies Underlying Teachers' Curriculum

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) described three schools of thought concerning education: romanticism, cultural transmission, and the cognitive-developmental position. In telling of their experiences, the participants indicated ideas that fit within the three philosophies. Marcie and Sylvia referred to children as just being

too young and not needing to work on things until they were ready. Barbara, Sylvia, Lynn, and Marcie showed the cultural transmission ideology in their pedagogy, such as learning facts and stickers for rewards. Bev and Claire both indicated in their interviews, in the way their rooms were arranged, and in their actual communication with the children observed by the researcher the idea of learning coming from the cognitive-developmental position. They both saw curriculum as mental activities coming from the teacher and students together. They stood out as being particularly constructivist in their teaching and in their authentic assessment. Case studies of Bev and Claire would be further interesting research to pursue to see how they accomplish their goals as well as to learn how they came to view teaching this way.

The children's work displayed in Sylvia's and Barbara's classrooms indicated very didactic interactions with the children. The scarecrow the children colored, cut out and put together according to a model communicated to the children not to think and create, but rather to do just what the teacher said to do. Barbara's "journaling" that the children were going to begin soon after the interview, in which the children copied their first name each day until they could make it successfully, then move to the last name, then to shapes, etc. was an example of a very didactic activity. Journaling in which the children write or draw what they want to in order to express their ideas is a well known literacy activity, but only if it is done in a way that allows the children to use their emerging written language expression skills.

There were also variations in how early literacy was approached that ranged from the didactic cultural transmission ideology to the constructivist cognitive-

developmental view. For example, in Sylvia's and Barbara's classrooms, there was an extreme amount of structure. One letter was taught each week, and in both of their classrooms, the letters were taught in sequence beginning with "A." Wasik (2001) discussed the value of teaching the letters of the alphabet to young children, but not in a rigid sequence, out of context of their other literacy activities.

However, in thinking about theoretical perspectives as a frame for instruction, the issueis not as much *what* they teach. Rather, it is *how they decide* what to teach midst the pressure of getting children "ready" in impoverished neighborhoods, where a large number of children and their families can not speak English. From this study it was determined that teachers go back to their own philosophical views of how children learn and what young children need; they provide the nurturance and care that young children need, and they connect with the parents. They see the benefits in what they do, and most of them enjoy what they do. Their curriculum is experiential in the classroom between themselves and the children, and at times, the assistant. This experience of the curriculum in the classroom meets the district's standards, includes the curricula adopted by the district, and yet has each teacher's personal watermark on her work.

Funds of Knowledge

The funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) that the participants bring to their professional landscape are rich. Together they have a total of 123 years of teaching experience. They have all been well educated, with most holding Master's Degrees. Their experiences in the classroom have included a number of schools with different

principals and in different environments. Their personal lives are also rich in funds of knowledge. Several of them have traveled to other parts of the world and have outside interests that add to their lives. Most of them have children and several have experienced life's difficulties such as divorce or loved ones who are seriously ill.

The Living Out of the Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge

The core themes became apparent true to the emergent design of a phenomenological study. Interestingly, although allthe participants are working in the same school district, have been given the same "Course Syllabus" for a curriculum, and have the same job description, there is a wide variety of classroom activities in which they engage. Yet the way the teachers approach their classroom experiences is not dependent on district mandate. Instead, each teacher constructs her own personal practical knowledge and lives it out in professional experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). Dependent on each participant's own philosophical view of theory, she weaves the mandates into what she feels she should do.

Her personal practical knowledge is her story. As she experiences her classroom activities and interactions with the assistant and the children, and to a lesser extent to parents when they drop off, pick up or visit with the children, her personal practical knowledge changes. Thus, she constructs knowledge based on experiences. Within that experiential curriculum of the classroom the practicing person is the focus, because she makes many of the decisions regarding what the classroom will be like interpersonally, temporally, and physically (1996). Therefore,

the participants can all implement the same ready-made commercial curriculum and yet it can look very different to an observer.

The experiential curriculum makes the pressure of "getting all the preschoolers ready for kindergarten" (Marcie, personal communication, October, 2003) manageable. As Marcie so eloquently stated, "When I see something my kids need, I put it in my lesson plans. That's how I teach the required curriculum. The district says everyone has homework—even my babies. So, I'll send home a little activity the parents and children can work on together, like matching the animals to their homes. So I'm doing homework. So everyone is happy." While a number of requirements have been given to the teachers to accomplish with the children, the teachers continue to work very hard at helping the young children and their families engage in the activities that the teachers know are important.

Conclusion

Barnett and Hustedt referred to preschool as "the most important grade" (2003, p. 54). While the public and early childhood professionals may debate whether preschool is indeed the *most* important, certainly the majority of those who are familiar with research pertaining to the topic will agree that good preschool experiences are something to which every young child is entitled. Realizing the value of the work in which preschool teachers are involved makes the desire to share the findings and implications of those findings very real. Through the transcendental-phenomenological reduction that has taken place, this study moved beyond the everyday lives of public preschool teachers and sought to understand

their lived experiences in this very important work of teaching 4-year-olds. This study transformed their experiences into phenomena to study, and led back to the source of meaning and existence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants in this phenomenological study shared their vision and gave a voice to their colleagues by reflecting upon what happens in and out of public preschool classrooms. While a study with this small sample size is not intended to be generalizable to the entire population of public preschool teachers, the participants' information was valuable in presenting current issues as well as questions for possible future research. The voices of the participants in this study have provided the early childhood field with new information, while confirming and making a stronger case for issues that had already been identified. Certainly, the impact of this study may not only help early childhood educators, but also the young children and their families with whom they work.

Endnotes

[1] In keeping with the statistic that 97% of the early childhood workforce is female, the preschool teacher is referred to as "she" throughout this study. The pronouns "him" and "her" are used interchangeably when referring to children.

[2] Although the material is copyrighted, the full citation is not provided to protect confidentiality of the school district and the participants.

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APPENDICES

University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Informed Consent Form
The Experience of Public Preschool Teachers: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study entitled *The Experience of Public Preschool Teachers: A Phenomenological Study*. The study will be conducted by me, Janette C. Wetsel, a doctoral student at OU, under the direction of Dr. Loraine Dunn of the department of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum at OU. This document is your consent to participate in the study. The purpose of the research is to study the lived experience of public school Pre-K teachers. I hope that the information gained from the study will help Oklahoma and other states understand ways to make the pre-k experience better for teachers, children, and their families.

I will give you a survey to complete on your own. You and I will be the only people to see this survey. I will not show it to your administrator or school officials. In addition, I will interview you once (1-1 ½ hours) during the semester. The interview will take place in about the 3rd – 5th weeks of school, once you have had a chance to get settled in to the new school year. This interview will be audio taped so that I can transcribe our conversation and look at it more closely. I may possibly also contact you a 2nd time close to the end of the semester if I need to clarify information after I have studied it.

I will also be collecting school newsletters, written communication from the principal, and other written documents that are a part of your lived experience as a public preschool teacher. This will help me gain more insight into public school Pre-K.

All of the information I receive from during this study will remain confidential. No one but me will be allowed to see this information. My research report will not identify you, your school, or any of the children. Instead, the final research report will use pseudonyms for all involved. Your participation in this research project will remain confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and-or regulations

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not have any effect on your employment. Participating in the study will not involve any risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. If you agree to participate you may change your mind and stop your participation at any time without any negative consequences. Just call me at the number below. If you decide that you do not want to be audio taped, you may tell me to stop and I will stop. Call me if you have any questions about the study, or you can call Dr. Dunn at (405) 325-1509. You may also contact the Office of Research Administration the University of Oklahoma, 405-325-8110, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in the study.

Thank you for your help.

Janette C. Wetsel
(405) 974-5134

Consent Statement:
_____ I agree to participate in the study.
Signature:_____Date:_____

____ I agree to be audio taped.
Signature:_____Date:_____

APPENDIX B

Public Preschool in Oklahoma—Issues and Ideas

Part I. Please supply the following information. Unless indicated otherwise, please select only one response per question.

The lead teacher or co-teacher in each public preschool classroom should complete this form.

What grades are taught at your school? _____

Is your preschool program held at the elementary school building, or does your school contract off site with others (such as churches or child care facilities)?
__ Building __ Off-site (please specify) _____

1. Do you currently teach in a preschool, pre-k, or 4-year-old program in a public school? __ Yes __ No
If yes, do you consider yourself a-an _____lead teacher _____co-teacher _____ assistant

2. Do you work part-time or full-time? _____

3. What % of the day is devoted to teaching preschool? _____ If less than 100%, please specify what else you do:
_____

4. How many years have you taught in your current position? _____. 5. Total number of years of public school teaching experience_____.

6. Total number of years of teaching experience in any setting_____

7. Have you taught other grades? If yes, please list: _____

8. Which of the following best describes your preparation program? Please check all that apply:
__ BSE in Early Childhood Education __ CDA __ Other type of training-credential _____
(please specify)
__ Other Bachelor's Degree in _____ __ Some graduate work _____
(please specify) (number of hours)
__ Master's Degree in _____
(please specify)

9. If you have a degree(s), from which college-university(s) did you obtain it-them?_____

10. What professional journals-magazines-newsletters do you read on a regular basis? _____

APPENDIX B

Part II: Please indicate which of the following best describes your feelings about teaching preschool.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
I feel that other faculty members in the school consider that what I do is valuable.						
Children who attend preschool perform better in kindergarten than those who do not.						
I am not seen as being a professional since I teach preschool.						
I feel free to choose the type of curriculum I want to use in my classroom.						
The type of schooling a person has to prepare to be a teacher makes a difference in the quality of that person's teaching.						
Teachers of older children understand the significance of what I do.						
The principal at my school sees preschool as important.						
The main purpose of preschool should be for young children to play and learn, rather than to "get them ready" for kindergarten.						

APPENDIX B

Part II: Please indicate which of the following best describes your feelings about teaching preschool.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
Parents are highly involved at my school.						
I have all the materials I need to teach effectively.						
Parental participation in my classroom gets in the way.						
Preschool teachers are pressured to teach the children things that they are too young to learn.						
I am not included in regular faculty activities.						
The facilities are adequate for my preschool classroom.						
I enjoy teaching preschool.						
The kindergarten teacher and I collaborate frequently.						
Administrators really listen to what we need to improve the preschool program.						
The teachers at our school value each other's work.						
The location of the preschool classroom makes it difficult to collaborate with other teachers.						

APPENDIX B

Part III: Please provide some information about yourself. This is for study purposes only.

Which best describes you race-ethnic origin? African American Hispanic Asian American Native American Caucasian

Which age group best describes your age? 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 55+

Which group best describes your annual household income?

15,001-25,000 25,001-35,000 35,001-45,000 45,001-55,000 55,001-65,000 over 65,000

Part IV: Use this area to add any additional comments concerning what you think the current issues of public school preschools are. Use extra paper if you would like.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey.

Appendix C

The Experience of Public Preschool Teachers: A Phenomenological Study

Interview—Pre-K Teacher

Participant's name _____

Date_____

1. The new superintendent calls you in and tells you to describe what you do everyday. What would you say?

2. What are the things you enjoy most about teaching pre-k?

3. What are the biggest challenges you face?

4. How is the diversity that your children bring to the classroom reflected in your curriculum and instruction (Smith & Dickinson, 2002)?

5. How do you plan your approach to curriculum?

6. Do you think your school is unique or typical in its strengths and challenges?

7. Describe the typical faculty meeting at your school. What things that are discussed are pertinent to your work?

8 Do you collaborate with other groups here in your work? (Head Start, child care, Even Start). If yes, describe:

9. Have you taught other grades? If so, which ones?

10. Describe your teacher preparation program. Do you think it prepared you well for what you are now doing?

11. What professional journals-magazines-newsletters do you read on a regular basis?

12. Describe your school and community setting: