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PLAYFUL PRACTICES AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines one veteran teacher's experiences to understand better how her playful personality and use of play in the classroom have continually shaped her identity and influenced the development of children's social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships with students and families. Through a hybrid-process of open-ended coding and a priori coding of parent interviews, personal journals and reflections, and parent communications, six themes emerged that provide insight into the possible interconnections between playfulness, professional identity, and student development: teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships, and joy. Together, these themes can offer insight into how playfulness, both as a mindset and a teaching practice, can create space for connection, healing, and joy in education. Implications derived from the findings point to using a playful approach to help children build emotional regulation, empathy, confidence, and resilience while also supporting the teacher's own growth. While grounded in one teacher's lived experience, this study offers reflections that could inform how educators, programs, and policies might value playfulness and joy as essential parts of developmentally appropriate learning practices.

Keywords: teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships, joy

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of this Study

This autoethnographic study examines how my teacher identity as a veteran early childhood educator, as explored through personal narratives and introspection, intersects with and contributes to joyful learning approaches, emotional and social development, children's psychological well-being, and interpersonal relationships in early childhood education. This examination should deepen my understanding of how my teaching practices support children's holistic development and might offer valuable insight for improving educational approaches that foster holistic child development.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2007) stated, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). Through examining my experiences in the classroom over the last twenty years, I aim to explore how identity and practice might support children's development. This knowledge may help early childhood educators create effective and meaningful learning environments for children facing similar circumstances to those I experienced as a child, enabling them to thrive and succeed. This exploration is not just academic, but a profoundly personal journey to understand and improve educational practices. In addition, I draw from my personal life and professional experiences to create meaningful and effective learning environments for all children. Especially children facing adversity, as I once did as a child myself.

This study is grounded in several interconnected theoretical frameworks that inform both my teacher identity and my pedagogical approach. First, Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1986) underscores the importance of modeling and observation in the development of children’s

social-emotional and behavioral skills, which aligns with my use of playfulness and relationship-building in the classroom. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a developmental lens to understand how children's growth is shaped by interactions across multiple environments, including family, school, and community, which reflects my belief in the importance of strong relationships and family-school partnerships. Additionally, Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020) emphasizes the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of play as a developmental necessity, not merely a leisure activity. These frameworks support the central argument of this autoethnography: that teacher identity, particularly one rooted in playfulness, directly informs how we support children's holistic development. By reflecting on my lived experiences as both a child and educator, I analyzed how theory and practice converge to shape my approach and influence the learning environment I co-construct with students and families. A brief overview is provided here, with a more comprehensive discussion to follow in Chapter 2.

The findings of this study have the potential to influence educational practices within the early childhood classroom by highlighting the value of playfulness and social-emotional learning in fostering well-rounded, holistic development in young children. Stakeholders and educators can use this evidence to advocate for increased support and resources for playful programs, professional development for teachers, and the integration of social-emotional learning into the early education curriculum (Jones et al., 2019). These findings may also help educators embrace their own teacher identity to better understand how it is a part of their teaching practices and affects the children in their care. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on best practices in early childhood education, ensuring that children receive the foundational skills and support they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. I value the opportunity to explore and share this autoethnography so other teachers might gain a

deeper understanding of how vital their identity as a teacher is to helping a child, or how gaining perspective about the lives of their students can influence the learning environment. Even if one child is helped by someone implementing these practices because of this research, it will have been worth my time exploring these concepts.

Playfulness constitutes a fundamental aspect of my teacher identity and primary instructional approach. I desire to better understand how educators can effectively employ playful activities and experiences to develop positive relationships among children, families, and educators (Rogers, 2021). Play is a multifaceted concept that is fundamental to early childhood education. It is defined as any activity that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated. Essentially, people engage in play simply for the enjoyment and exploration it provides, not necessarily for any external goals or rewards (Pellegrini, 2011). Play is characterized by its spontaneity, imagination, and the active engagement of the child. Play can take various forms, ranging from physical and social play to constructive and fantasy play, each supporting different aspects of a child's development. Furthermore, play examines how teachers can enhance social-emotional learning skills, such as emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving, through play-based activities (Pyle & DeLuca, 2021).

Research Questions Guiding the Study

The autoethnography is guided by several key research questions centered on teachers' practices:

1. How do my personal experiences, cultural background, and professional insights inform my teacher identity and enhance my approach to playfulness and social-emotional development, for children’s growth and learning?

2. How does my facilitation and participation in playfulness impact children's social-emotional skills, mental health, and well-being?
3. How does my practice of implementing and engaging in playfulness affect my interpersonal relationships with children and families?

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on teachers' identity and how it affects playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships in early childhood education, potentially influencing educational practices and policies to support teachers' and children's overall well-being and development.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, I will continuously refer to key terms central to the research. These are terms I have become deeply familiar with through my own educational journey, reflection of my practice, and through teaching other educators. Consistent with autoethnographic methodology (Chang, 2016), my professional expertise as a veteran early childhood educator informed my initial focus on these concepts of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, children's mental health and well-being, relationships, and all areas that I suspected would be essential to examining my teaching practices. Given my familiarity with these educational concepts, I anticipate they will be central to examining and understanding my teaching practices in this study. The definition of terms is important to the foundation of this study. There is some clarity in this chapter on each term, and it will be expanded more in the literature review section of Chapter 2.

Teacher Identity

Teacher identity refers to the evolving self-concept of the educator, shaped by personal history, cultural background, professional experiences, and pedagogical/philosophical beliefs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Chang, 2016). In my study, teacher identity is examined through an autoethnographic lens. The formation of teacher identity occurs through the convergence of individual biography, contextual influences, classroom experiences, and reflective practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Palmer, 2007). Recognizing how teacher identity can influence not only the concepts teachers teach but also the approaches they use to teach them is essential. Palmer (2007) explains "we teach who we are" (p. 2), explaining how authentic teaching arises from the integration of personal integrity and professional practices. Teacher identity in this context functions as a bridge between theory and practice, shaping how educators build relationships, respond to student needs, approach playfulness, and engage in emotionally responsive teaching (Williams, 2021).

Playfulness

In my study, *playfulness* refers to the collective use of playful behaviors, activities, or mindsets in educational contexts that promote joy, curiosity, and imagination. This includes free play, guided play, teacher-child imaginative engagement, storytelling, and playful conversation (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020; Whitebread, 2019). Playfulness is used as a pedagogical approach and as a relational tool to foster connection, emotional safety, and meaningful learning. It reflects a classroom culture in which play is not only permitted but actively integrated into everyday practices across various learning domains.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning is defined as the process through which children acquire and apply the skills needed to manage emotions, build positive relationships, show empathy, and

make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020; Jones et al., 2019;). In my study, social-emotional learning is supported through playfulness, teacher modeling, and intentional classroom practices which might help children develop self-regulation, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. Social-emotional learning is understood as both an academic and developmental priority in early childhood education (Denham et al., 2019).

Mental Health and Well-Being

Mental health and well-being refer to a child's emotional and psychological state, including their ability to cope with stress, express feelings, build resilience, and experience joy in learning environments (Masten, 2021; Oberle et al., 2020). In my study, mental health and well-being is addressed as both an outcome of nurturing, playfulness in an environment, and a developmental process supported through responsive teaching and emotionally safe classrooms. It includes trauma-informed practices which work toward protecting and promoting the whole child (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016).

Relationships

Relationships in early childhood education are connections between teacher and child, peer-to-peer interactions, and family-teacher partnerships. Strong relationships built on trust, empathy, and responsive communication are vital to children's development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; NAEYC, 2021). In my study, relationships are examined as a means through which playfulness, social-emotional learning, and mental health supports are delivered, experienced, and sustained across classroom and home environments.

The Importance of Studying Playfulness and Playful Behaviors

Studying playfulness and the associated playful behaviors is crucial within the broader context of early childhood education because of its profound impact on holistic child

development. Playful behaviors, such as imaginative play, role-playing, and cooperative play, are integral components of playfulness. These behaviors might encourage children to engage in hands-on activities and explorations essential for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, or (NAEYC, 2021), adopting play-based learning enables educators to nurture 21st-century skills such as collaborative, communicative, and problem-solving skills, fostering strong relationships among peers and adults. This approach supports academic achievement and prepares children for lifelong success by promoting mental and physical health (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Whitebread & Basilio, 2019). Unfortunately, in recent years, there has been a shift towards a more structured, academic-focused early childhood education curriculum, reducing opportunities for play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2020). This trend is concerning as it overlooks the crucial role of play in developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills in young children (Nicolopoulou, 2020; Toub et al., 2018).

Researcher Background as a Teacher

I have studied in many realms of education, such as early education, special education, education administration, and school counseling, seeking to understand how best to support and nurture young learners, especially those facing significant challenges. These diverse educational experiences have equipped me with a broad understanding of various teaching approaches, administrative practices, and counseling techniques, each contributing to my comprehensive view of practical education.

This rich background has influenced my perspectives and practices in education and the power of play. In early education, I have seen firsthand the critical importance of play in cognitive and social development because of the profound growth I have observed in children

when they are given the freedom to explore, collaborate, and solve problems through imaginative playfulness (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Special education training taught me the value of individualized approaches and the need for inclusivity in the classroom (Murphy et al., 2021). My experiences in education administration provided insights into systemic issues and the importance of supportive school environments, aligning with research that emphasizes the role of school climate and leadership in shaping student outcomes and well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Williams, 2021). My training in school counseling emphasized the emotional and psychological aspects of student development (Jones et al., 2021). My professional experiences in classrooms range from teaching in for-profit corporate centers, working as a paraprofessional to help students with disabilities, being a teacher and Director in a federally funded Head Start program, teaching in a university laboratory school, and finding myself in public education within my community. Over the last eight years, I have developed my reflexivity in practice through my roles as an Adjunct Instructor in Education, an Instructional Coach, and a teacher mentor while concurrently working as a Kindergarten teacher. This combination of professional and personal experiences has shaped my approach to teaching, allowing me to create meaningful learning experiences for my students. I also understand the importance of advocating for students' rights and inclusivity in the classroom (Gay, 2018).

My Current Teaching Placement

My kindergarten classroom is located in a low-income neighborhood, where, over the years, between fifty-five percent to sixty-three percent of the students received free, or reduced-price lunches through a federal government aid program (U.S. News and World Report*,* n.d.). I witness daily the struggles and triumphs of young children facing significant challenges. Each morning, I greet and hug a diverse group of students, many of whom come from backgrounds

marked by trauma, instability, and socioeconomic hardship. These children often arrive with visible signs of their struggles: tired eyes from restless nights, anxious expressions, and behaviors reflecting the stress and insecurity they are facing in their lives. However, they also come to me with the potential to do many great things in life, a potential that is a testament to their resilience (Masten, 2021). These children need the support, advocacy, and guidance of someone who understands their needs. Understanding how to tap into this potential involves recognizing the impact of playfulness, when combined with fostering solid relationships and developing children's social and emotional skills (Jones & Kahn, 2020). Play has been crucial in child development, supporting cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Whitebread, 2019).

Supporting my students through playfulness involves several key approaches. I strive to understand and integrate my students' interests into the curriculum as a fundamental practice; when children see their interests reflected in classroom activities, they become more engaged and motivated to learn (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). I can observe their play preferences and incorporate those themes into lessons. I strive to create a classroom environment that sparks joy and encourages imaginative play and innovation through these themes. This includes storytelling, role-playing, and creating a playful atmosphere that encourages children to explore and express themselves. Supporting imaginative play makes learning fun and fosters creativity and problem-solving skills (Whitebread, 2019). By responding to children's needs with playfulness, I am able to develop and strengthen the relationships I have with the children.

Personal Connection to the Topic

My upbringing and personal experiences have profoundly shaped my journey into education. Instability and hardship marked my early years, with my young parents struggling with mental health issues and substance abuse. Often, we had no food, no money, and nowhere

to turn. Fearing they would lose guardianship if they sought help, my parents avoided seeking help, leaving my childhood characterized by neglect, financial instability, and frequent displacement. We endured evictions and extended periods of homelessness and lived in cramped apartments with sparse furnishings. Returning to locked doors and starting over without our belongings became a familiar routine. This transient lifestyle prevented me from attending the same elementary school for over a year, making me keenly aware of educational disparities. I was often left feeling depressed and helpless, struggling to keep up academically and socially with my peers. The instability took a toll on my mental health, making it difficult to envision a brighter future (Bethell et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020). As noted by Bethell et al. (2019) children who endure these kinds of circumstances may have difficulty envisioning a future which differs from the current reality they exist in.

Despite these challenges, I believed in the power of education as a tool to transcend socioeconomic barriers based on comments my teachers would make to me. Determined to break the cycle of poverty and substance abuse, I developed resilience and was guided by a few dedicated educators who mentored me along the way. Through their encouragement and my mother's steadfast support, I developed the resilience and belief in possibility that became foundational to who I am today. Additionally, my mother played a crucial role in nurturing my creativity and imagination. She encouraged me to find joy in play and imagination, which fueled my determination to continue. As an adult, I still find joy in play in my daily practices, so I chose a profession deeply rooted in play. Play and imagination provided me with an escape from the harsh realities of my environment, allowing me to explore new possibilities and dream of a better future (UNICEF, 2018). With her support and my determination, I became the first person in my family to pursue higher education.

Growing up in an urban setting with many socioeconomic challenges profoundly influenced my adult worldview. As a middle-aged white woman from a low-income household, navigating life as a first-generation college student and a second-generation immigrant has given me a deep understanding of the barriers many children face. This understanding fuels my passion for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. I encounter diverse learners in my kindergarten classroom daily, each with unique backgrounds and needs. I work closely with children who have experienced trauma, ensuring they feel safe and supported, and I help children with special needs by tailoring play-based activities to their abilities and strengths. These experiences have reinforced my belief in the power of play as a tool for building relationships, fostering social-emotional learning skills, and promoting mental health (Miller, 2020).

My Teacher Identity

A teacher's identity significantly affects the practices they engage in within their classrooms with children (Palmer, 2007). As a result of childhood trauma, my experiences with play profoundly shaped how I relate and engage in practices with my students. Growing up in an unstable environment has given me a deep understanding of my students' challenges. This personal history enables me to connect with them, providing the empathy and insight necessary to support their needs. For instance, I remember a student, Azlyn (a pseudonym), who exhibited signs of distress like what I experienced as a child: withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, and frequent outbursts. Recognizing these signs, I approached Azlyn with patience and empathy, providing her with a listening ear and support to help her manage her emotions.

My personal journey has equipped me with resilience and determination, qualities I strive to pass on to my students. I share age-appropriate stories from my life to illustrate the power of perseverance and the importance of education for overcoming adversity. By leveraging my

personal experiences, I aim to positively impact my students' lives, helping them navigate their challenges and fostering their social-emotional growth (Jones et al., 2019). This connection makes me uniquely qualified to understand and address the needs of my students, ensuring they receive the care and support necessary to thrive in their educational journey, and looking back, I know it would have helped me more as a child.

These personal experiences, in combination with my formal education, classroom roles, and administrative leadership, inform the development of my teacher identity. As noted earlier, teacher identity is shaped through a complex interplay of personal history, social context, professional experiences, and ongoing self-reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Palmer, 2007). It is not fixed, but evolves as educators navigate their beliefs, pedagogical practices, and interactions with students and families (Williams, 2021). My identity as a teacher is defined not only by my educational training but also by my lived experiences. This compels me to be relational, responsive, and deeply rooted in a commitment to the whole child. Over time, this identity has become increasingly centered around playfulness, not just in the use of play-based pedagogy, but in the way I approach teaching with joy, flexibility, imagination, and connection.

All these experiences inform my belief in the transformative power of playfulness. They highlight the necessity of addressing the whole child cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically (Whitebread, 2019). Play-based learning, used alongside playfulness, is an educational approach that uses play as the primary method for children to explore, experiment, and understand the world around them. Play-based learning encourages creativity, critical thinking, and social skills by allowing children to engage in fun and instructional activities (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). My hope is that by sharing this with other education practitioners, they might learn from my personal narratives and gain new insights for supporting their own practices,

specifically in how to foster and sustain play and playfulness in early learning environments to help children of varied backgrounds thrive.

Having a lighthearted and playful attitude in my classroom helps build strong connections with students; humor can break down barriers and make the classroom a safe and welcoming place, with simple jokes and playful interactions easing anxiety and building trust. Integrating social-emotional learning into daily activities is essential for supporting children's emotional and social development. This involves teaching skills like emotional regulation, empathy, and effective communication through structured activities, spontaneous teachable moments, and modeling (Jones et al., 2021). Social-emotional learning can be integrated into play by encouraging cooperative games and role-playing scenarios that require children to practice these skills. Creating a supportive environment where children feel safe and valued is crucial for their mental health; this includes providing consistent routines, positive reinforcement, and opportunities to express their feelings. Incorporating mindfulness activities, such as simple breathing exercises or quiet time, can help children manage stress and anxiety (Masten, 2021).

Structure of the Study

The introduction starts this autoethnographic study by outlining the purpose and significance of the study. It introduces the key themes of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships while also providing an overview of the research questions guiding the study. Additionally, this section establishes the foundation for the narrative by exploring the professional experiences and personal connection of the researcher-myself, to the topic, thereby establishing credibility. My expertise is essential because it allows the reader to understand my perspective and approach to the topic, which is critical in understanding the results and conclusions of the study (Adams et al., 2017).

Following the introduction, the literature review contextualizes the study within the broader field of early childhood education and explores the existing research on teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health of young children, relationships, and ideas supporting each of those areas. It highlights how these areas intersect in the current literature (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). This section will show how this autoethnographic study addresses these intersections by offering a unique, personal perspective on the application of theory and helpful approaches aligned with developmentally appropriate practices (Ginsburg, 2021).

The methods chapter will describe how the research collection of various artifacts including parent interviews, personal journals and reflections, and parent communications was used to provide a comprehensive and detailed view of my teaching practices (White, 2020). These artifacts, will offer insights into the emotional and social dimensions of the topic, illustrating the impact of playfulness on children's development and how I might have added to the transformative potential of education (Jones et al., 2021). Ethical considerations are addressed, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent, and reflection on potential biases. Analysis of parent interviews of past classroom families will provide initial insight into practices that have shaped my teaching and reflect my teacher identity. The family communications section will gather past family information by using surveys, collecting and analyzing ‘voices’ from parents and guardians via email, and examining social media postings. Finally, personal journals and reflections created by me over the last eight years will add another layer of depth to the overall research (Smith et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns across the data sources, focusing on narrative coherence and cultural and social insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As will be revealed in the findings chapter, the themes that arose from the analysis of the data were

teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental- health and well-being, relationships, and *joy.* Then, I integrated the autoethnographic practice of weaving personal narratives with the data from various artifacts, resulting in a rich understanding of the research questions and contributing valuable insights into early childhood education (Chang, 2016).

During the analysis, I also used Play Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory as a theoretical framework for studying playfulness' impact on students, offering a holistic approach to development (Bandura, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Play Theory, articulated by Smith and Pellegrini (2020), also provides a foundational understanding of how play facilitates children's cognitive, social, and emotional development as I note through reflection on the data through the lens of these theories.

The personal narrative section, an important component of autoethnography, describes how my experiences have developed from childhood to becoming an educator. The personal narrative also clarifies my background and struggles and how they have shaped my philosophy of education and classroom practices. Key moments and insights will be described from specific memories and personal journal entries made during those experiences (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

The conclusions section will present a summary of the findings, connect back to the research questions, and note how findings contribute to existing theory. Limitations and implications will be provided, as well as the personal insights I discovered. I will suggest areas for possible future research and potential applications for the study's insights in broader educational contexts (White, 2020).

Overall, the study is qualitative research focusing on autoethnography applied to early education. It combines personal experiences, theoretical insights, literature review, data collection methods, analysis, personal narrative, and discussion to explore and understand my experiences with young children over the course of my career (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review aims to explore key concepts regarding how playfulness might support and influence teacher identity, social-emotional learning, children's mental health and well-being, and relationships in early childhood education. As established in Chapter 1, these areas emerged from my professional experience as central to understanding playful teaching practices, and this review examines existing scholarship that illuminates these interconnections.

It is essential to examine the existing body of research on growing concerns in early childhood education about playfulness, what play is, play-based learning, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being and relationships, and other factors that play a part in it. By reviewing previous studies, we can gain insights to the benefits of these approaches, understand how they have been implemented in various educational settings, and identify the factors that influence their success (Ezzy, 2013).

Existing Literature

Concerns in Early Education

Current concerns in early childhood education are multifaceted and increasingly complex. There is a notable shift towards structured, academically focused curricula that often marginalize playful approaches despite their crucial role in holistic child development (Whitebread, 2019). This trend is contributing to heightened behavioral issues and declining mental health among students, as they lack sufficient opportunities to develop critical social and emotional competencies through play (Jones & Kahn, 2020).

Furthermore, the growing frequency of disruptive classroom behaviors is often exacerbated by the digital environment and a decrease in face-to-face social interactions, which are essential for emotional and social development (Murphy et al., 2021). Alongside these issues,

there is significant concern regarding the loss of teacher identity. Without a strong sense of professional identity, educators struggle to implement effective teaching approaches that align with playfulness and social-emotional principles, which further impacts their ability to address student needs effectively (Williams, 2021). The need for social-emotional learning integration is becoming increasingly urgent as studies continue to demonstrate its effectiveness in enhancing students' ability to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and engage positively with others (Oberle et al., 2020). However, systemic barriers often prevent the full integration of playfulness and social-emotional learning into curricula, underscoring the need for educational reforms that support these approaches as foundational to academic success and overall child well-being (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Disruptive Behaviors. In early education, discussions regarding student behavior in early childhood education often led to theories or ideas of the function of behavior, with various factors such as parenting styles, technological influences, and the lingering effects of the pandemic taking center stage. Other health impairments such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) are noted as concerns of behavior issues in classrooms, too. The primary assumption in education is that extreme behaviors are affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACE) scores, parenting styles, and the digital environment students are engulfed in.

The counterargument is that extreme behaviors have not increased. Students have always exhibited behaviors, with some citing the behavior management practices of school districts as the primary issue. Another perspective is that behavior issues are now noticed more by the shift toward inclusion in classrooms and changes in special education testing and qualifications parameters. Some challenges in deciding if the definition of “extreme behavior” varies by

district, administrator, educator, and caregiver. For this study, “extreme behavior” will be defined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) *Mindsets and Behaviors Standards* taken from Dr. Brigman’s (2017) work with behavior observed in students about academic success as behaviors that impact the students’ safety and others around them. The ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors Standards clearly define extreme behavior, making it easier to measure and report. It also helps to ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page regarding understanding and responding to extreme behavior.

Children are increasingly arriving at school without the ability to engage in play or play effectively with their peers, as I have witnessed in my classroom and heard from other early childhood educators in my building and surrounding areas. This trend is attributed to several factors. The first is the rise of digital technology; screen time has limited opportunities for children to engage in face-to-face social interactions, which are crucial for developing play skills (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Most of my students have multiple methods of technology in their homes and crave screen time as much as they are allowed.

Another possible contributing factor is the prevalence of structured activities and decreased free play opportunities. Parents and caregivers often enroll children in organized sports, classes, and other structured activities, leaving less time for spontaneous, imaginative play (Whitebread, 2019). One significant reason is the reduced unstructured playtime noted at home due to the increased focus on academic readiness and standardized testing (Nicolopoulou, 2020). My students commonly share that they have multiple planned events between the end of the school day and late into the night. Additionally, socioeconomic factors and family dynamics can play a role. Children from low-income families or those experiencing trauma or instability may not have access to safe play environments or the support needed to engage in play

effectively (Masten, 2021). Educators also report that many children lack the social-emotional skills necessary for cooperative play, such as sharing, taking turns, and resolving conflicts. This deficit is often linked to the reduced time spent in social play and the lack of opportunities to practice these skills in early childhood settings (Jones et al., 2019). The emphasis on academic skills over social-emotional development in early education can further exacerbate this issue (Oberle et al., 2020). In summary, the rise in digital technology use, the emphasis on structured activities, and socioeconomic and familial factors all contribute to why children arrive at school without the ability to play or play well with others. Addressing this issue requires a balanced approach that values and integrates playfulness and social-emotional development in early childhood education.

Increasingly, we are witnessing growing issues with disruptive behaviors in educational settings, leading to more diagnoses of conduct disorders like oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and sensory processing issues. These conditions can cause unacceptable classroom behaviors and significantly impede learning. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 2024) estimates that one to sixteen percent of all school-age children and adolescents have ODD. Oppositional defiant disorder is characterized by a persistent pattern of disobedience, hostility, and defiance toward authority figures and is one of the most common conditions referred to children's mental health clinics. Additionally, approximately nine-point four percent of children and adolescents have been diagnosed with ADHD (Danielson et al., 2018). Sensory processing issues are also prevalent, affecting about five to sixteen percent of children in the general population (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009). There is a growing recognition that extreme behaviors associated with trauma are gaining attention. These observed behaviors, including a consistent pattern of

disobedience, hostility, and defiance, present significant challenges in educational settings (Cook et al., 2017).

While there is debate surrounding the root causes of extreme behaviors, there is a consensus on the need to address them effectively to foster a conducive and positive learning environment. It is essential to identify children who are most at risk early in their development. In 2007, Fergusson et al.'s study showed children who demonstrate serious conduct problems in early childhood are at high risk of developing life-long difficulties such as emotional problems and/or antisocial behavior, as well as poor functioning across other areas of daily life in early adulthood, such as heavy drinking, being overweight, social isolation, and being unemployed, or uneducated. The study followed a group of at-risk children with behaviors into adulthood (Fergusson et al., 2007). In the context of this study, such research highlights why playfulness and social-emotional development are essential in the early years, not only to support academic growth but also to prevent the escalation of behavioral issues and promote long-term well-being.

Causes and Symptoms of Disruptive Behaviors. Disruptive behaviors, which can manifest as aggression, defiance, and hyperactivity, are increasingly observed in classrooms and can significantly impact a child's ability to learn and socialize. Conduct disorders are typically characterized by persistent patterns of antisocial, aggressive, or defiant behavior that go beyond the norms of typical childhood behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2018). Home life trauma, including exposure to violence, neglect, or instability, can also contribute significantly to these behaviors, as children may mimic conflict resolution strategies they observe at home (Murphy et al., 2021).

Furthermore, socioeconomic status plays a crucial role, with children from lower-income families often experiencing higher levels of stress and fewer resources for emotional support,

contributing to behavioral issues (Jones et al., 2020). Additionally, the overuse of digital technology has been linked to increased impulsivity and reduced attention spans, further compounding the challenges in managing classroom behaviors (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective interventions that address the root causes of disruptive behaviors and support the mental and emotional well-being of affected children.

Conduct Disorders. Disruptive behaviors in children, often associated with diagnoses like oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD), are frequently linked to underlying trauma experienced during childhood, such as abuse, neglect, or harsh environments (Giano et al., 2020). These behaviors, exceeding typical defiance, can be misconstrued and lead to mislabeling as emotionally disturbed if the trauma component is overlooked (Giano et al., 2020). Acknowledging this connection between behaviors and trauma is crucial for educators, mental health professionals, and caregivers to adopt empathetic interventions and support (Giano et al., 2020). Viewing disruptive behaviors through a trauma-informed lens emphasizes addressing underlying trauma with appropriate interventions, fostering emotional well-being and resilience in affected children (Giano et al., 2020).

Common signs of oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and behavior disorders in children include temper outbursts, arguments with adults, uncooperative behavior, physical aggression, and reluctance to follow the rules (Nationwide Children’s Mental Health, 2019). There is an ongoing debate about the validity of ODD as a distinct diagnosis, with concerns about stigma and mischaracterization of normative reactions to trauma (Beltrán et al., 2021; Szentiványi & Balázs, 2018). Research indicates that ODD can significantly impact children's quality of life, particularly in social and emotional relations and executive functioning (Szentiványi & Balázs,

2018). These findings raise questions about the potential overuse of the ODD diagnosis by clinical behaviorists.

The study conducted by Kleine Deters et al. (2020) compared executive functioning (visual working memory, visual attention, inhibitory control) and emotion recognition between youth (8–18 years old, 123 boys, 55 girls) with ODD and/or CD (with or without ODD), and healthy controls. The study also examined the relationship between ODD, CD, and ADHD symptoms counts, internalizing symptoms, and all outcome measures, as well as executive functioning to emotion recognition. Visual working memory and inhibitory control were impaired in children in from the ODD and CD groups compared healthy controls. Anger, disgust, fear, happiness, and sadness recognition were impaired in the CD group of children; only anger recognition was impaired in the ODD group. Visual working memory was associated with the recognition of all basic emotions.

These studies all shared the same information for treatments available to these children. There are two traditional treatments and one less used. The first is psychotherapy. In this approach, a behavioral health specialist talks to the child about their thoughts and feelings. The specialist helps the child learn how to recognize their anger cues and use coping strategies to manage anger. Therapy may be conducted individually or with the child's parent present. The second standard treatment is medication. However, medication can be complex and may cause many health-related side effects, especially for a child who is still developing during early childhood. The last form of treatment, considered the least invasive, involves using play therapy, which aims to improve and develop critical social and emotional skills and concepts.

Children with a history of with disruptive behaviors often exhibit behaviors that surpass typical defiance observed in their peers, with their reactions usually heightened by the trauma

they have endured. Their responses are frequently said to be stuck in the “fight or flight” mode. It is crucial to recognize that these behaviors may sometimes be misconstrued, leading to mislabeling of the child as emotionally disturbed, especially when the underlying trauma is overlooked or misunderstood (Giano et al., 2020).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Sensory Processing Disorders. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the identification and diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and sensory processing disorders in early childhood. These conditions significantly impact young children's learning and behavior, often leading to challenges in educational settings. ADHD is characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interfere with functioning or development. Recent studies have shown that the prevalence of ADHD diagnoses among young children is rising. According to Danielson et al. (2018), approximately 9.4 percent of children aged 2 to 17 in the United States have been diagnosed with ADHD. The symptoms of ADHD can manifest early in childhood, sometimes as early as the preschool years, leading to difficulties in classroom management and learning engagement (Danielson et al., 2018).

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) involves difficulty responding appropriately to sensory information. Children with SPD may overreact or underreact to sensory stimuli, resulting in significant challenges in daily functioning and learning environments. A study by Ben-Sasson et al. (2019) found that sensory processing issues are present in about 5 to 16 percent of children, highlighting the widespread nature of this condition in early childhood. These sensory difficulties can lead to behaviors such as tantrums, avoidance of certain activities, and difficulty focusing, which can be mistaken for behavioral issues (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009).

The increased awareness and diagnosis of these conditions may be attributed to better diagnostic tools and greater understanding among parents, educators, and healthcare professionals. However, this also underscores the need for effective interventions and supportive educational practices to help children with ADHD and SPD succeed in early childhood education settings. Early identification and intervention are crucial, as they can significantly improve outcomes for children with these disorders, helping them to develop essential skills for academic and social success (Ghanizadeh, 2017). Educators and caregivers must be equipped with strategies to support children with ADHD and SPD, including structured routines, sensory-friendly classroom environments, and individualized support plans. Incorporating playful approaches can also be beneficial, as they offer flexible and engaging ways to meet the diverse needs of children with these conditions (Ghanizadeh, 2017).

Homelife trauma and parenting styles. Many children and adolescents experience trauma, which is a significant concern. It is crucial to understand what causes trauma, its symptoms, and the available treatments, considering that these factors can differ based on a child's unique experiences and family situation. Educators must recognize the vital role of social and emotional development in early childhood, as it greatly influences a child's behavior (CDC, 2021). By addressing trauma and supporting healthy social-emotional growth, we are better able to help children navigate difficulties and improve their overall well-being and academic success.

Parenting styles are one of the factors affecting the formation of children’s personalities and using ineffective styles can lead to several negative consequences, such as behavioral problems (Maccoby, 2015). There are four main parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved (Baumrind, 1966). Parenting styles significantly shape children’s development and can lead to varying social and emotional well-being outcomes. Authoritative

parenting, characterized by high responsiveness and high demandingness, combines warmth and support with clear boundaries, fostering self-esteem, social skills, and academic success in children (Baumrind, 1966; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

In contrast, authoritarian parenting involves high demandingness but low responsiveness, emphasizing obedience and discipline, often resulting in lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and aggression in children (Baumrind, 1966). Permissive parenting, which features high responsiveness but low demandingness, tends to produce children who struggle with self-regulation and authority, often displaying behavioral problems (Maccoby, 2015). Lastly, uninvolved parenting, marked by low responsiveness and low demandingness, is associated with the poorest outcomes, including emotional withdrawal, academic underachievement, and developmental delays (Baumrind, 1966; Maccoby, 2015). These parenting styles collectively underscore the critical role parents play in shaping their children's personalities and behaviors.

Many children in the United States are in crisis. Children across the nation are facing trauma at high rates, with adverse childhood experience (ACE) scores revealing significant issues. An ACE score is a measure used to assess the amount of trauma a child has experienced, including factors such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. Higher ACE scores are correlated with increased risks of various adverse outcomes, including mental health issues, substance abuse, and chronic diseases (CDC, 2021). The United Health Foundation states that a significant percentage of children in the United States have experienced two or more adverse childhood experiences. These experiences include economic hardship; parental divorce or separation; living with someone who had an alcohol or drug problem; witnessing or being a victim of neighborhood violence; living with someone who was mentally ill, suicidal, or severely depressed; witnessing domestic violence; having a parent who served jail time; experiencing

unfair treatment based on race or ethnicity; or the death of a parent. This statistic underscores the importance of addressing mental health at a national level. Children exposed to these traumas are more likely to leave school, have substance abuse issues, experience higher levels of health problems, and depend more on state welfare programs.

During the first five years, a child's brain is at its most flexible, making this a critical period for learning and growth (Center on the Developing Child, 2023). Research indicates that children who face adversity in the first years of life, often related to living in poverty, are more at risk for experiencing lifelong effects from trauma. Prolonged trauma during childhood can damage to a child's brain synapses, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, physical health, and mental health (Lovallo et al., 2012).

Socio-Economic Status. Various studies have indicated that children from low-income families face unique challenges influenced by their socioeconomic status in their social and emotional development. For example, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997) found that children from low-income families were more likely to display higher levels of externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and defiance, which are strong indicators of poor social and emotional adjustment. Access to resources, including quality education and healthcare, is essential for fostering positive social and emotional development.

Active support from the parents is a major factor in children's social and emotional development. This was demonstrated by Conger et al. (2010), who found that families of higher socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to use positive parenting techniques. These techniques typically consist of offering emotional support, such as encouragement and reassurance, as well as establishing clear boundaries. Surprisingly, families of lower socioeconomic status are more often found to be involved in emotionally draining situations or

trauma responses. This pattern was supported by findings from Chen and Paterson (2011). Their research concluded that when basic needs, as defined by Maslow, are not being met, feelings of scarcity automatically ensue for the parent. As a result, essential capacities such as sleep and patience become compromised, which creates a chaotic environment for the child and leads to disruptive behaviors as a means of seeking connection.

Social and economic imbalances in relationships between peers the child's age, as well as interpersonal connection, can contribute significantly to emotion-related issues. According to research undertaken by Crosnoe (2006), children who come from poorer families experience obstacles to accessing those social resources, which assist in establishing secure connections with others and finding people who could provide psychological and emotional support.

In a long-term survey conducted by McLoyd (1998), it was demonstrated that academic performance and overall attitude toward education were directly correlated with an individual's or a family's annual income. Those coming from lower classes would appear to be more likely to face a staggering decline in their motivation to succeed in school and strive to reach those academic peaks that would rival those of their counterparts, who find themselves in a significantly better economic position.

The association between SES and mental health is a well-established relationship that has been documented throughout the psychological community. This relationship can be explained by various factors associated with a lack of financial resources, including limited access to goods and services, formal education, adequate healthcare, and informal support networks (Peverill et al., 2021). A substantial body of empirical evidence that has been found which consistently shows that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience

mental health difficulties than those who come from a higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Adler & Stewart, 2010; Peverill et al., 2021).

Digital Technology Overuse. In his 2019 OECD report, Gottschalk explores the multifaceted effects of digital device overuse on children's development, providing a comprehensive overview of both positive and negative outcomes. The report acknowledges that moderate use of technology can enhance learning opportunities and foster essential digital literacy skills. However, it also warns of the adverse effects associated with excessive screen time, such as reduced attention spans, impaired social skills, and increased risks of anxiety and depression. Gottschalk advocates for balanced technology use, emphasizing the importance of setting boundaries and encouraging diverse activities to support holistic child development. He proposes evidence-based guidelines to help parents and educators manage children's screen time effectively, aiming to balance the benefits of technology with its potential drawbacks (Gottschalk, 2019).

Chassiakos et al. (2016) from the American Academy of Pediatrics provide a detailed policy statement on media use by children and adolescents. The statement synthesizes extensive research, highlighting that while media can offer educational benefits, excessive screen time can lead to sleep disturbances, obesity, and behavioral issues. The authors stress the critical role of parents in mediating media use, recommending the creation of a family media plan that sets clear limits on screen time and ensures media consumption does not interfere with sleep, physical activity, and other healthy behaviors. They emphasize that media use should be age-appropriate and focus on high-quality educational content to maximize benefits and minimize harm. This balanced approach is aimed at supporting children's overall well-being while integrating media into their daily lives effectively (Chassiakos et al., 2016).

Teacher Identity Shaping Philosophy of Teaching

The significance of educators' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds in implementing playfulness approaches to support holistic development, particularly in the domains of relationships, social and emotional learning, and mental health, plays a crucial role in the implications of practice in the classroom (NAEYC, 2009). Louisa Derman-Sparks (2010), for example, argues that educators' cultural identities and experiences need to be examined and shared, their professional assumptions and beliefs challenged and changed, and their competence in becoming culturally relevant and responsive educators developed (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Nasrollahi et al. (2021) completed an autoethnographic study exploring how teachers' lifelong experiences shape their views toward education and their own teacher identity. The study highlighted the significance of the living environment and life events in shaping teachers' perspectives and practices. Most importantly, the study highlighted how these factors influences relationships and a sense of community within a classroom environment, which can also affect the academic success of students under the care of that teacher.

When you examine the interconnectedness of the CASEL (2022) core competencies with educators' practices, self-awareness emerges as a crucial skill for an educator. Self-awareness involves the ability to accurately recognize and reflect one's own emotions, thoughts, and values, and how they influence behavior. When educators are emotionally self-aware, they can make a dramatic difference in how they teach and interact with children. Self-management is also an essential skill, as it involves the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, values, and behaviors in different situations. In addition, being organized and prepared for the day is essential in the early childhood field because children love structure. At the same time, an

educator needs to provide room for flexibility and grace. Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, which supports the formation of strong bonds between children and their teachers (CASEL, 2022). Responsible decision–making is a skill that many educators lack because of the lack of opportunities for autonomy in the classroom. Decision-making skills are attained through authentic opportunities that require teachers to make informed choice independently. Together, these skills describe what it means to have "withitness" within a high-functioning and effective classroom (Marzano, 2007, p. 6).

Educators who have accurately perceive emotions in themselves and others are more likely to listen attentively to correctly identify student needs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015). Educators who have accurate emotional knowledge of themselves and the ability to name emotions that they are feeling can better regulate their emotions and teach these skills to students as well. Educators who have their own mental health under control, as Derman-Sparks (1989) states, may be more aware of their students' mental health and may be more likely to be open with students about mental health. Furthermore, educators who pay attention to their emotions and have excellent emotional regulation skills could be more likely to model and teach this skill to children, creating a more supportive and nourishing classroom (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Professional Expertise and Perspectives in Play-Based Environments

To enhance play-based learning, educators draw on their personal experiences and cultural context. For example, Derman-Sparks et al. (2010) teaches that personal experiences and cultural context impact play, relationships, social-emotional teaching, and children's mental health. According to Wang et al. (2015), integrating cultural elements into play-based activities can guide the learning experiences, foster a strong cultural identity, and help them develop a sense of cultural belonging. Another important aspect, according to Derman-Sparks et al. (2010),

is that educators should learn and reflect on their personal experiences to support the social-emotional learning skills of the children through play-based learning. Kidger et al. (2012) suggest that when educators, as part of open discussion, share personal experiences and apply strategies to promote mental health and resilience in a play-based curriculum, children feel more comfortable seeking help and support.

Research bodies such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2024) have highlighted how professional expertise and perspective are essential to the effectiveness of play-based environments in supporting development. For example, Kearney, Morgan, and Obeng (2017) described how educators' experiences and perspectives of educators regarding play-based learning demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These qualities are critical in designing and implementing appropriate learning experiences that maximize children's development.

Teachers who have been formally trained in play-based pedagogy as recommended by NAEYC are more adept at planning and implement developmentally appropriate activities that encourage children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (NAEYC, 2024). Educators' personal attitudes and beliefs toward play also shape their teaching practices and interactions with children. Several studies have determined that teachers who consider play to be foundational to learning, as prescribed by NAEYC, can provide opportunities for open-ended exploration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving in their classrooms (Bergen & Coscia, 2001).

Additionally, the professional perspective on play-based learning is influenced by core concepts of some broad educational philosophies and approaches, such as constructivism and socio-cultural theory, which NAEYC (2024) also identifies as integral to the play-based

approach. These perspectives enrich teachers' understanding in a play-based approaches. Consequently, by integrating these diverse views through NAEYC's standards and guidelines, teachers can create play-based environments that encourage children's holistic development and love for learning.

Play in Early Childhood

In the context of early childhood education, play is crucial because it offers a natural means for children to explore their world, practice new skills, and build social connections. It is through play that children learn to negotiate, solve problems, and regulate their emotions. This learning process is supported by Parten's stages of play, which illustrate how children's play behavior evolves from solitary activities to more complex, socially interactive forms (Parten, 1932). Each stage, unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative, serves a unique purpose in the child's development. For example, solitary play helps children explore and master their own bodies and environments independently, while cooperative play involves working together with peers toward a common goal, which is essential for developing social skills and teamwork. Understanding play as a multifaceted activity that shapes cognitive, emotional, and social development leads us to explore the variety of ways individuals engage in play.

Types of Play Personalities

Stuart Brown's (2009) exploration of "play personalities" provides a framework for understanding the diverse ways individuals engage with play, each personality supporting different aspects of development (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). The "Joker" thrives on humor and silliness, essential for creating a joyful learning environment. The "Kinesthetic" prefers physical activity, which is vital for kinesthetic learners who benefit from active engagement. The

"Explorer" is driven by curiosity, indispensable for fostering an investigative learning atmosphere. The "Competitor" enjoys challenges and can inspire motivation through goal-oriented activities. The "Director" takes pleasure in organizing and leading, skills beneficial for group dynamics and cooperative learning. The "Collector" enjoys gathering items or experiences, which can be channeled into educational projects that involve categorization and analysis. The "Artist or Creator" engages deeply with crafting and creating, providing a foundation for art-based educational content. Lastly, the "Storyteller" leverages narratives to enhance comprehension and engagement through stories and dramas. Recognizing and integrating these play personalities in educational settings allows educators to cater to varied learning styles and needs, enriching the educational experience and ensuring that all students find engaging and effective ways to learn (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Play, in its many forms, is known to have profound effects on neurological development. Each type of play can activate different brain areas and foster distinct cognitive and emotional skills. By providing different types of play, educators can create an environment of exploration and creativity where students can learn at their own pace. This also helps to develop problem-solving skills, logical thinking, and a sense of self-confidence (Brown & Vaughan, 2009)

Play and the Brain

Play has been shown to have profound effects on brain development, as evidenced by several studies that have used brain imaging to observe these impacts directly. Research by Panksepp (2016) reveals that play activates areas in the prefrontal cortex that are involved in higher executive functions such as problem-solving, decision-making, and social interactions. This neurological activation supports cognitive flexibility and working memory, which are crucial for children's development (Bergen & Mauer, 2020). Further studies have shown that

through play, children can develop advanced problem-solving skills and engage in complex social interactions, both of which stimulate brain areas associated with emotional regulation and social cognition. Gray (2017) and White (2019) have highlighted that these interactive play experiences contribute significantly to social competence and emotional resilience, which are essential for healthy developmental trajectories. Brain imaging in these contexts often shows increased activity in the frontal lobes, areas critical for processing and managing emotions and social interactions.

Moreover, the neuroplastic effects of play are emphasized in the work by Bateson and Martin (2018), who discuss how varied play activities enhance the brain's ability to reorganize itself, forming new neural connections. These increased activity levels in the frontal lobes and improved neural connections allow for better management of emotions, enhanced social skills, and improved problem-solving abilities. This plasticity is not only fundamental for learning new skills but also for adapting to new social environments and challenges. Plasticity refers to the brain's ability to change and adapt because of experience (Bateson & Martin, 2018). This ability is crucial for learning and memory, allowing individuals to acquire new knowledge and adjust to new situations throughout their lives. Plasticity is essential for the development of resilience, allowing us to cope with difficult situations and adapt to change. It is also essential for the development of creativity and problem-solving skills (Bateson & Martin, 2018).

Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan, in their book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain* (2009), emphasize the transformative power of play in human development. They argue that play is not just beneficial but essential for brain development, the enhancement of creativity, and the maintenance of emotional and physical well-being throughout one's life. According to Brown and Vaughan, play activates the prefrontal cortex, the brain region crucial for cognitive planning,

decision-making, and social behavior regulation. This activation helps the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, they discuss how play is a vital component of neurological growth and development from infancy through adulthood, arguing that it helps to build complex neural network systems that are critical for the integration of emotional and rational functions. They also highlight the role of play in fostering resilience, allowing individuals to better cope with stress and adversity.

In addition to cognitive and social-emotional benefits, Pellis and Pellis (2017) have noted that play can significantly reduce stress, with brain scans showing reduced activity in stress-related areas and increased release of endorphins, the brain's natural feel-good chemicals. Schaefer (2018) further supports this, indicating that play provides essential coping mechanisms that help mitigate the impacts of stress and trauma.

These insights into the neuroscience of play underscore its critical role in child development, demonstrating how playfulness not only enriches children's educational experiences but also supports fundamental brain functions that contribute to their overall well-being and resilience. Without play, children may miss out on the critical neurological activation in the prefrontal cortex, potentially hindering their problem-solving, decision-making, and social interaction skills. The absence of play could also limit cognitive flexibility and working memory development, which are essential for adapting to new situations and learning. Furthermore, a lack of play might reduce opportunities for children to develop advanced problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and social competence, leading to increased stress and fewer coping mechanisms for managing challenges.

Loss of Play

A recent study highlighted the alarming decline in children's playtime and its implications for their development. According to a report discussed by Psychology Today, children today are experiencing significantly less playtime compared to previous generations, losing approximately 12 hours of play per week. This decline is attributed to various factors, including increased screen time, structured activities, and a greater emphasis on academic skills from a young age (LeVos, 2023).

The reduction in play has profound effects on children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development. Play is crucial for developing skills such as emotional regulation, creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction. Experts argue that play and learning are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, enhancing both academic and developmental outcomes. For instance, Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, a professor at Temple University, asserts that play can significantly improve learning in subjects like math and science while fostering critical thinking and creativity (as cited in D'Souza, 2021).

Moreover, play has been identified as a vital tool for mitigating the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health. The American Academy of Pediatrics and other experts have emphasized the importance of play in helping children cope with stress and trauma, advocating for its increased integration into early childhood education (LeVos, 2023; D'Souza, 2021). These findings underscore the necessity of preserving and promoting play in early childhood education to support holistic child development and well-being.

These findings underscore the necessity of preserving and promoting play in early childhood education to support holistic child development and well-being. Consequently, play-based learning emerges as a powerful pedagogical approach that integrates playful activities into the curriculum, making learning both enjoyable and effective. By fostering an environment of

playfulness, educators can facilitate deeper engagement, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning among children.

Playfulness

Playfulness, which encourages children to participate in hands-on activities and explorations, has become a significant trend in early childhood education. These activities have attracted interest because they can have profoundly impact a child's holistic development. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2024), by adopting play-based learning, educators can nurture collaborative, communicative, and problem-solving skills of the children. This type of learning is also an effective means of fostering strong relationships among children and adults. It enables children to be mentally and physically healthy. Not only does play-based learning pave the way for a child's academic achievement but prepares children for a life and career full of success in a holistic manner.

There are various types of playfulness that can be utilized in an early childhood classroom. In early childhood education, playfulness is integral to fostering a comprehensive developmental environment, encompassing various forms of play, each tailored to nurture different developmental domains effectively. For instance, unstructured play, characterized by its child-led and open-ended nature, bolsters creativity and decision-making skills. Researchers such as Bateson (2015) emphasize how this play enhances autonomy and imaginative thinking. Conversely, structured play, as outlined by Pyle and Bigelow (2015), focuses on achieving specific learning outcomes, providing children with a framework to explore and learn predefined skills and concepts, ideal for introducing mathematical concepts through activities such as block building.

Guided play merges the spontaneity of unstructured play with the direction of structured play, creating an environment where educators subtly guide children without taking control. Weisberg et al. (2013) highlight how this facilitates not only academic learning but also social skills as children learn to navigate their interactions within the play setting. Similarly, exploratory play allows children to manipulate and test out materials, a process that Gopnik (2016) notes is crucial for fostering scientific thinking and problem-solving skills from a young age.

As children grow, they engage in role-play and games with rules, each supporting distinct areas of development. Role-play helps in developing emotional understanding and social skills, a point supported by Lillard et al. (2013) support by showing how children learn empathy and language through social interactions in play. Games with rules teach fairness and strategic thinking, which are critical for social development and cognitive skills (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013).

Each type of playfulness plays a pivotal role in developing a well-rounded, capable young learner. By integrating these varied types of play into the curriculum, educators can cater to the holistic development of children, ensuring they gain the necessary cognitive, social, and emotional skills to succeed. These insights underline the transformative power of play-based learning in the educational landscape, supporting its inclusion in early childhood educational settings as both foundational and beneficial.

Playfulness is a crucial trait in early childhood education, promoting cognitive, social, and emotional growth through engaging, spirited, and imaginative activities. Playfulness encourages children to explore their environment, express creativity, and develop empathy and

problem-solving skills (Bateson, 2015). This trait is integral to imaginative play, which is central to developmental milestones and learning processes.

Research underscores the benefits of playfulness in educational settings, suggesting that it enhances motivation, reduces stress, and improves learning outcomes. Studies have shown that a playful approach in classrooms increases student engagement and fosters a positive learning environment (Toub et al., 2018). Additionally, playfulness in educators can lead to more effective interactions with students, helping to convey information in a manner that is easier for children to understand and retain (Weisberg et al., 2013). Incorporating playfulness into early education not only makes learning enjoyable but also supports critical developmental functions, such as social competence and emotional resilience. It provides children with opportunities to engage in social interactions that are essential for developing interpersonal skills and adapting to social norms (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016).

Therefore, embracing playfulness in early childhood education settings is supported by substantial evidence indicating its vast benefits across multiple domains of child development. In the formative stages of childhood, development in the cognitive, emotional, and social domains is extremely rapid. Playfulness supports children's development across cognitive, emotional, and social domains through interactive and engaging activities tailored to their developmental stages.

Social and Emotional Development through Playfulness

Social skills are developed through play as children interact with peers and navigate shared play experiences. Play activities that require turn-taking, cooperation, and negotiation help children learn important interpersonal skills and social norms (Ginsburg, 2007). According to Parten’s stages of play (1932), as children grow, they progress from solitary play to more cooperative social play, learning to collaborate and communicate effectively with others. Play is

crucial for emotional development as it provides a safe space for children to express their feelings and learn to regulate their emotions. Through play, children experiment with different social roles and scenarios, which helps them understand complex emotional concepts and empathy (Ginsburg, 2007). Play also allows for the expression of joy, frustration, and anger in a controlled environment, helping children learn to manage these emotions effectively.

The interaction between children and their caregivers' during play is pivotal. Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) demonstrate that when adults participate in child-led play, they provide scaffolding that helps children achieve higher levels of thinking and problem-solving than they would on their own. This type of engagement not only promotes immediate learning and development but also instills a sense of security and self-worth in children, contributing long-term to their emotional resilience and social competence.

Interpersonal Relationships Through Playfulness

The similarities seen in the literature emphasize the pivotal role relationships play as the main instrument for teaching and learning within early childhood settings. Constructive relationships are formed in various ways among educators and children, with peers, and with families. These relationships are based on reciprocal respect, trust, and understanding. They are essential for children's social and emotional development and for creating a nurturing and supportive learning environment (NAEYC, 2024). Playfulness is a natural extension that supports these relationships and leads to the building of social and emotional skills.

Playfulness within early childhood educational settings has been found to enhance positive relationships, creating a profound sense of belonging for all participants. Playfulness creates opportunities for meaningful interactions between educators and children, facilitating responsive and nurturing caregiving practices (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2003). Additionally, play

serves as a bridge for building connections between educators and families, as parents are often involved in play-based activities and encouraged to participate in their children's learning journey (Schwartz, 2016).

Supportive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of trauma in children. These relationships exist between parent and child, but many children experience these interactions with other adults, such as teachers. Early childhood teachers often help educate families on the importance of these relationships and childhood experiences, too, allowing the family to create a new developmental trend. Enrolling a child in a quality early education environment with trained professionals to assess the needs of students before most brain development has occurred allows ample time for early interventions. Attachment theory proposed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1978) emphasizes the critical role of early relationships and attachments in shaping children's social and emotional development. Secure attachments to caregivers facilitate the development of trust, empathy, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions, while insecure attachments may lead to mistrust and difficulties in emotional control (Ainsworth, 1978).

Attachment theory-based social-emotional learning programs emphasize the importance of supportive adult-child bonds, emotional responsiveness, and safe environments that encourage emotional openness and expression (Ainsworth, 1978). When children feel secure and supported, they can better engage in cognitive learning and benefit from play-based learning experiences that foster creativity, problem-solving skills, and positive social interactions (Ainsworth, 1978). Incorporating attachment theory principles into social-emotional learning and play-based learning can significantly enhance students' socio-emotional well-being and contribute to their overall academic and personal growth (Ainsworth, 1978).

Teacher Playfulness and Student Relationships. Recent research highlights the significant impact of play-based learning and playfulness on the relationships between teachers and their students. A study conducted by Weisberg et al. (2020) investigated how playfulness incorporated into teaching approaches affects student engagement and learning outcomes. The findings revealed that teachers who employed play-based methods and demonstrated a playful demeanor facilitated a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. This approach enhanced the relational bond between teachers and students, leading to increased student participation, better emotional connections, and improved educational outcomes.

The study further indicated that playfulness in the classroom setting encourages students to express themselves more openly and engage more deeply with the material. Teachers using play-based learning were able to adapt their interactions based on student responses, creating a feedback loop that promoted active learning and mutual respect. This adaptive teaching style, rooted in playfulness and responsiveness to student needs, supported cognitive and academic skills and social and emotional development, underscoring the holistic benefits of integrating play into educational practices.

Teacher Playfulness and Family Relationships. Research indicates that play-based learning and playfulness can significantly enhance relationships between teachers and the families of their students. A study by Rogers (2021) explored how playfulness in classroom settings affects the dynamics between teachers and families. The findings suggest that when teachers incorporate playfulness, they foster a more collaborative and trusting relationship with parents and caregivers. Play-based activities often extend beyond the classroom, encouraging family involvement and reinforcing the importance of learning through play at home. The study revealed that teachers who regularly communicated the benefits of play-based learning and

involved families in playful activities, such as family play nights or interactive homework assignments, saw improved engagement from parents. These parents were more likely to participate in school events and support their child's learning journey. The playfulness of teachers also made them more approachable, allowing parents to feel comfortable discussing their child's progress and concerns (Rogers, 2021).

A study by Edwards et al. (2019) examined the role of play-based learning in fostering stronger connections between educators and families. The study found that play-based activities and a playful teaching approach encouraged greater family engagement and communication, contributing to a more cohesive and supportive educational environment. This approach helps break down barriers between home and school, allowing parents and caregivers to feel more comfortable participating in their child's education. The study revealed that families appreciated the visible joy and engagement in their children's learning experiences, which encouraged them to be more involved and supportive of the educational process. This shared focus on play facilitated more meaningful conversations about the child's strengths, interests, and areas for growth. By using play as a central theme, teachers could better communicate the learning objectives and outcomes to families, making the educational goals more transparent and collaborative (Edwards et al., 2019).

Playfulness and Students with Student Relationships. Corsaro (2014) suggests that play-based learning has a profound impact on building positive relationships among peers in early childhood education environments. His research indicates that when children participate in play activities, it facilitates the development of strong connections and social abilities (Corsaro, 2014). For instance, cooperation and empathy, as well as mutual respect in relating to others, all benefited from engaging in collaborative play, according to the research conducted by Bergen

and Coscia (2001). In addition, Corsaro (2014) argued that peer interaction plays a vital role in social competence and emotional development in children. Playful learning also gives children a natural situation to exercise a lot of the skills they will need as they move through childhood, getting along with others, working out conflicts, and engaging in simple deals and agreements.

Play-based learning within early childhood educational settings has been found to enhance positive relationships, creating a profound sense of belonging for all participants. Playfulness creates opportunities for meaningful interactions between educators and children, facilitating responsive and nurturing caregiving practices (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2003). Additionally, play serves as a bridge for building connections between educators and families, as parents are often involved in play-based activities and encouraged to participate in their children's learning journey (Schwartz, 2016).

Importance of Play-Based Learning and Playfulness in Early Childhood Education

Pellegrini and Smith (2020) found that play-based learning can boost cognitive development. It does so by sharpening problem-solving skills. In addition, play provides safe places for exploration. In them, children can test ideas and theories, develop symbolic thinking, make choices, and learn to organize information. As we will discuss in more detail, play promotes the flexibility of thought and the ability to overcome preconceived ideas, which will be crucial in the 21st century. Play also offers a rich context for emotional expression and regulation, allowing children to explore and understand their feelings in a safe and supportive environment (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Additionally, play-based approaches accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences, promoting active engagement and intrinsic motivation among young learners (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2003). Integrating play into early education

curriculum not only enhances academic readiness but also nurtures holistic development, nurturing resilience, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning.

Play-based learning goes beyond the usual ways of teaching by putting children at the center of the learning experience. By taking part in imaginative play, cooperative activities, and working together to solve problems, children grow in a holistic manner and develop the skills they need to succeed in life. By learning through play, teachers create a safe and nurturing environment where children can learn how to deal with their emotions, build up their personal strengths, and create the tools they require to deal with life. When educators work play into the classroom while children are young, they are establishing good relationships and enabling children to keep learning the skills they need to keep themselves emotionally safe (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2003; Pellegrini & Smith, 2020).

Educators can create enriching play-based learning environments that promote holistic child development by understanding and facilitating each play stage within Parten's framework. Incorporating unstructured play, peer interactions, collaborative projects, and imaginative play activities supports children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth (Parten, 1932). Play-based learning experiences that scaffold children's progression through Parten's stages contribute to developing essential skills such as self-regulation, social competence, creativity, and problem-solving, enhancing overall learning outcomes in early childhood education (Parten, 1932).

Barriers to Effective Play-based Learning

Barriers to effective play-based learning are numerous and can significantly hinder the potential benefits of this educational approach. Understanding these barriers is crucial for educators and policymakers to implement successful play-based learning approaches in early

childhood education. One significant barrier is the increasing pressure to meet academic standards and standardized testing requirements. Educators often feel compelled to prioritize direct instruction over play-based learning to ensure that children meet specific benchmarks. This pressure can reduce the time allocated for play and limit opportunities for child-directed, exploratory learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Another barrier is the lack of adequate training and professional development for teachers. Many educators are not sufficiently prepared to integrate play-based learning into their classrooms effectively. This lack of preparation can result in a reluctance to adopt play-based methods or an inability to implement them effectively, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes (Murphy et al., 2021). Additionally, the physical environment of many early childhood education settings can pose a barrier. Classrooms that are not designed to facilitate play-based learning may lack the necessary resources, space, and materials for children to engage in meaningful play. This can limit children's opportunities to explore, create, and interact in ways that support their development (Whitebread & Basilio, 2019).

Parental attitudes and beliefs about play can also be a barrier. Some parents may not recognize the educational value of play and may prefer more traditional, academic-focused approaches. This can lead to a lack of support for play-based learning initiatives and create tension between educators and families (Van Velsor & Cox, 2019). A related study by Jones and Kahn (2020) highlighted the impact of these barriers on the effectiveness of play-based learning. Their research found that schools with strong support for playfulness from both administrators and parents were more successful in implementing these strategies. Conversely, schools that faced significant pressure to meet academic standards and lacked adequate training for teachers struggled to integrate play-based methods effectively. The study emphasized the need for a

balanced approach that values both academic achievement and the developmental benefits of play.

Overall, overcoming barriers to effective play-based learning requires multiple approaches. These approaches include advocating for policies that support play in early childhood education, providing professional development for teachers, designing conducive learning environments, and educating parents about the benefits of play. Addressing these barriers can help ensure that all children can benefit from playfulness.

Legislation for Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning has been proven by many studies to be beneficial in many ways. It has led to several states in the United States recognizing the critical importance of play-based learning and enacting laws to support its implementation in early childhood education settings. New Hampshire was the first state to legislate on this in 2018, mandating that educational environments should facilitate high-quality, child-directed experiences that incorporate play-based learning approaches (New America, 2023). This includes activities that promote movement, creative expression, exploration, socialization, and music. These legal requirements are aimed at ensuring young learners are provided with developmental experiences that are crucial for their holistic growth.

Oklahoma and Connecticut have followed suit. Oklahoma's Play to Learn Act, enacted in 2021, prohibits school districts from barring teachers from using play-based learning methods in early childhood education, defining these grades as PreKindergarten-third grade (New America, 2023). Connecticut, meanwhile, has recently passed legislation that requires play-based learning during the instructional time of each school day for all students in kindergarten and any preschool programs offered by the board, extending the permission up to fifth grade (Gesell

Program in Early Childhood, 2023). These legislative actions underscore a growing acknowledgment of the significant role that play has in educational settings, affirming its value in nurturing young minds in ways that traditional, more rigid educational frameworks may not fully address.

Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional competence is at the heart of how children develop; play-based learning emphasizes coping competencies within a supportive environment such as the school setting and the classroom. Developing social and emotional competence helps children get along with others, achieve their future goals, make sound judgments, and understand how to manage emotions (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). It also helps children develop resilience, empathy, and problem-solving skills (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These skills are essential for preparation for learning and need to be explicitly taught (CASEL, 2022). This teaching should be age-appropriate, interactive, and developmentally appropriate. Parents and caregivers should also be encouraged to support their children in developing these skills (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024).

Emotional Regulation

Playfulness supports emotional regulation by incorporating theories of emotion regulation like James Gross's (2008), which emphasize the importance of teaching practical strategies for managing emotions, particularly in children. These skills are essential for coping with stress, adapting to change, navigating social interactions, and making responsible decisions (Gross, 2008). When teachers incorporate Gross's insights into emotion regulation into Social and Emotional Learning frameworks, children can walk away from their early years with valuable tools for self-regulation as well as more specific guidance for managing their emotions.

As an illustration, social-emotional learning programs that draw from Gross's theories (2008) frequently include mindfulness, relaxation techniques, problem-solving, and communication skills to assist young people in emotional self-regulation. Incorporating Gross's insights into emotion regulation into social-emotional learning programs not only equips children with valuable tools for self-regulation but also enhances their ability to engage effectively in playfulness experiences (Gross, 2008). By fostering emotional resilience and self-awareness through social-emotional learning, educators create supportive environments where children can thrive academically and emotionally, even when facing trauma or behavioral issues (Gross, 2008). Similarly, Raver et al. (2011) found in a study that preschoolers who participated in play-based social and emotional learning in Head Start had significantly better emotional control skills than preschoolers who did not participate. According to this study, children's emotional regulation skills are effectively promoted through play-based learning as well as social and emotional learning.

Empathy and Inclusion

Playfulness significantly contributes to building empathy and inclusion in the classroom. Through structured and unstructured play activities, children develop the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate classroom environment. A recent study by Pyle and Danniels (2017) found that play-based learning activities that require cooperation and role-playing help children practice empathy and perspective-taking. For example, in a play scenario where children assume different roles in a family or community, they are encouraged to consider and act out the feelings and thoughts of others. This type of role-playing helps children develop a deeper understanding of their peers' emotions and experiences, promoting empathy and social cohesion.

In another study, Weisberg et al. (2018) highlighted that play-based learning environments that emphasize collaborative tasks lead to greater social inclusion. By engaging in group activities where success depends on teamwork, children learn to appreciate diverse perspectives and abilities. This inclusive approach ensures that all children, regardless of their background or abilities, feel valued and part of the community.

Rogers (2021) conducted research on the impact of playful interactions between teachers and students on fostering inclusive classroom environments. The study revealed that teachers who incorporate playfulness into their teaching practices create a more welcoming atmosphere, encouraging students to express themselves freely and respect each other's differences. These playful interactions help break down social barriers and build a sense of belonging among all students. These studies highlight the importance of integrating play-based learning and playfulness in early education to cultivate empathy and inclusion, ultimately leading to a more harmonious and supportive classroom environment.

Problem-Solving

Play-based learning is highly effective in building problem-solving skills in the classroom, fostering critical thinking and creativity among young learners. Through various forms of play, children encounter scenarios that require them to think strategically, experiment with different solutions, and collaborate with peers, all of which are essential for developing robust problem-solving abilities.

Weisberg et al. (2020) further support this notion, finding that play-based learning environments that incorporate elements of playful instruction, such as puzzles and construction activities, enhance children's ability to approach and solve complex problems. These activities

require children to plan, execute, and adjust their strategies, fostering flexible thinking and resilience when faced with challenges.

Rogers (2021) emphasized the role of teacher playfulness in enhancing problem-solving skills. By creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages experimentation and reduces fear of failure, teachers help children develop a growth mindset. This mindset is crucial for problem-solving, as it encourages children to view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than insurmountable obstacles. These studies collectively highlight the significant impact of play-based learning on children's problem-solving skills and the importance of incorporating playful activities and a supportive, experimental mindset in early education.

Early Intervention and Social-Emotional Learning

Early intervention services, including appropriate social-emotional learning, can change a child's developmental path and improve outcomes for children, families, and communities. Children who receive quality early education demonstrate more significant cognitive and socio-emotional growth than children who do not and become better citizens within their communities as they grow into adulthood. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading organization focused on advancing education in social and emotional learning (SEL). Founded in 1994, CASEL has determined that social-emotional learning comprises five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies form the core of CASEL's framework, providing a structured approach to fostering holistic student development (CASEL, 2022).

These competencies help students learn valuable life skills, such as identifying emotions, impulse control, empathy, teamwork, and ethical responsibility. Most teachers agree that these

skills are essential for students to learn, regardless of their background. Promoting social-emotional learning skills has been associated with positive academic outcomes (Eklund et al., 2018, p. 317). Social-emotional learning competencies overlap with other areas within education, such as school discipline, play-based initiatives, and trauma-informed practice.

Integrating CASEL's social-emotional learning competencies into educational practices, especially in play-based learning environments, can significantly benefit students dealing with trauma or behavioral issues. Educators can create a supportive and enriching atmosphere by equipping students with skills like emotional regulation, empathy, communication, and problem-solving through social-emotional learning. This approach enhances students' social-emotional well-being and contributes to their academic success and overall resilience (CASEL, 2022).

Mental Health and Well-Being

Research findings firmly support the role of playfulness in the promotion of children's mental health and overall well-being. Numerous studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of play on children's mental health, including the ability to reduce stress, process and express emotions, and generate positive attitudes. According to Ginsburg (2007), play acquires added significance not merely by providing opportunities for exploration of the diversity of human emotions but by offering a particularly powerful mechanism for helping children deal with difficult experiences and developing new coping strategies. Play also instills feelings of joy, inquisitiveness, and success, which overall adds to a child’s well-being and confidence in their personality (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). In addition, researchers and psychologists have recognized the efficacy of playfulness in the development of psychological and emotional well-being in those who have experienced trauma (Russell & Jarrold, 2018). Incorporating play cultivates nurturing environments with a focus on the psychological wellness and overall happiness of

children, thereby allowing for the building of durable emotional resilience, optimistic outlooks on life, and competence in relating to and understanding emotions.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Playfulness

Playfulness aligns with the ideas supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, which provides a foundational understanding of human motivation and behavior, categorizing needs into five distinct levels: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). In the context of play-based learning, Maslow's theory is particularly relevant as it emphasizes the importance of addressing lower-level needs before higher-level ones can be fully realized. Often, teachers emphasize the idea from Maslow (1943) that one must, "Maslow before you can teach." Playfulness can fulfill various needs identified by Maslow's hierarchy, such as providing a safe and secure space (safety needs), fostering positive social interactions and a sense of belonging (love and belonging needs), and promoting creativity, mastery, and personal growth (esteem and self-actualization needs).

For students with mental health issues, Maslow's theory supports the significance of creating supportive and nurturing environments that address their fundamental needs (Maslow, 1943). Playfulness can serve as a therapeutic tool by providing opportunities for emotional expression, social interaction, and skill development, contributing to the fulfillment of students' needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem (Maslow, 1943). By integrating play-based activities that cater to students' diverse needs across Maslow's hierarchy, educators can create enriching experiences that support holistic development and foster positive behavioral outcomes among students facing behavioral challenges or trauma affecting their mental health.

Play-Based Interventions for Mental Health

Play-based interventions have gained recognition as effective strategies for supporting the mental health and social-emotional development of children, particularly those facing behavioral challenges such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD). These interventions utilize the natural inclination of children towards play to create therapeutic environments that facilitate emotional expression, social learning, and behavioral regulation.

Recent studies have highlighted the effectiveness of play therapy in addressing various mental health issues. A study by Faramarzi (2021) demonstrated that child-centered play therapy significantly reduces aggression in children diagnosed with ODD. The study found that through engaging in play, children could express their emotions, develop self-regulation skills, and experience a reduction in inappropriate behaviors. This approach allowed children to communicate their feelings and thoughts in a non-threatening manner, promoting emotional healing and behavioral improvements.

Additionally, a study by Van Velsor and Cox (2019) examined the impact of play-based interventions on social skills development. The findings indicated that incorporating structured social training components into play therapy sessions enhanced children's abilities to navigate social interactions, develop empathy, and resolve conflicts. This approach proved particularly beneficial for children with social-cognitive deficits, as it provided them with practical opportunities to practice and refine their social skills in a supportive environment.

Moreover, recent research has underscored the role of play in fostering resilience and adaptive coping strategies. For instance, a study by Topham and Vanfleet (2020) highlighted how play therapy helped children develop adaptive coping mechanisms, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. The study revealed that children who engaged in therapeutic play

demonstrated significant improvements in their ability to manage stress and navigate challenging situations, contributing to overall mental well-being.

The integration of play-based interventions in educational and clinical settings offers a holistic approach to supporting children's mental health. By addressing the underlying social-cognitive processes and promoting positive social interactions, play therapy provides a foundation for improved behavioral outcomes and enhanced social-emotional functioning. This evidence underscores the importance of incorporating play-based approaches into mental health interventions for children, highlighting their potential to foster resilience, emotional regulation, and social competence.

Effects of Playfulness on Behavior and Development

Playfulness has significant positive effects on children's behavior and development, encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Recent studies have consistently shown that incorporating play into early childhood education fosters a range of developmental benefits. A study by Fisher et al. (2018) found that guided play, where children engage in activities with some adult scaffolding, significantly enhances executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-control. These skills are critical for behavior regulation and academic success. The study highlighted the idea that children involved in play-based learning environments exhibited better problem-solving abilities and higher levels of engagement compared to those in traditional direct-instruction settings.

Similarly, a study by Pyle and Danniels (2017) emphasized the role of play in social development. The researchers found that children participating in play-based activities developed stronger social skills, including cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution. These activities

provided children with opportunities to interact with peers, negotiate roles, and collaborate on projects, thereby enhancing their social competence and emotional regulation.

Additionally, Weisberg et al. (2020) demonstrated that play-based learning environments contribute to improved emotional development. The study indicated that children who engaged in imaginative play were better at understanding and expressing their emotions. This form of play allows children to experiment with different social roles and scenarios, helping them develop empathy and emotional intelligence.

Rogers (2021) investigated the impact of teacher-facilitated play on student behavior and found that classrooms incorporating playfulness and play-based activities saw a reduction in disruptive behaviors. The study revealed that play-based learning environments, where teachers actively engage with students in playful interactions, created a positive classroom atmosphere that encouraged appropriate behavior and active participation.

Positive Self-Efficacy in Learning

Play-based learning and playfulness have been shown to foster positive self-efficacy for both teachers and students, enhancing their confidence and motivation in the learning process. Self-efficacy, the belief in ones ability to succeed in specific situations, is crucial for academic achievement and overall well-being (Bandura, 1997).

For students, engaging in playfulness allows them to take an active role in their education, explore new ideas, and solve problems in a supportive environment. According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), children who participate in play-based learning activities develop a stronger sense of competence and confidence in their abilities. This sense of achievement and mastery is vital for building positive self-efficacy. When children successfully navigate

challenges during play, they learn to trust their problem-solving skills and resilience, which translates to greater confidence in academic tasks.

In a related study, Murphy et al. (2021) found that play-based learning environments encourage risk-taking and experimentation without fear of failure. This approach helps children develop a growth mindset, where they see challenges as opportunities to learn rather than threats to their self-worth. The study highlighted that students who engaged in play-based learning were more likely to persevere through difficulties and exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation, both of which are critical components of positive self-efficacy.

For teachers, incorporating play-based learning into their pedagogy can also enhance their self-efficacy. Teachers who use play-based strategies feel more competent in their ability to engage students and facilitate meaningful learning experiences. Williams (2021) suggests that when teachers observe the positive outcomes of play-based learning, such as increased student engagement and improved social skills, their confidence in their teaching abilities grows. This positive feedback loop encourages teachers to continue using and refining play-based approaches, further strengthening their self-efficacy.

Research by Van Velsor and Cox (2019) supports this notion, indicating that teachers who embrace playfulness in their teaching practices are more likely to develop strong, supportive relationships with their students. These relationships, in turn, foster a positive classroom environment where both teachers and students feel valued and capable. The study found that playfulness in teaching not only improves student outcomes but also enhances teacher satisfaction and reduces burnout.

In summary, playfulness promotes positive self-efficacy for both students and teachers by providing opportunities for success, fostering a growth mindset, and enhancing the overall learning environment.

Theoretical Framework

To frame this autoethnography, three key theoretical perspectives will be employed: Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory, and Play Theory. These three perspectives will provide insight into how the individual's environment shapes their behavior and how the individual is shaped by their environment. Additionally, they will help to explore how the individual's behavior affects their environment and how the environment, in turn, shapes the individual.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes the significance of modeling and reinforcing desired behaviors such as cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution, which are crucial skills for children's development (Bandura, 2018; Bandura & Walters, 1977). Understanding how teachers' personal experiences and identities shape the ways they model these behaviors can provide insights into enhancing playful approaches. Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes the critical role of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in child development. According to Bandura, children learn behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions by observing others, mainly when these behaviors are modeled by individuals, they consider significant, such as parents, teachers, or peers (Bandura, 2018; Bandura & Walters, 1977). This observational learning is especially effective in a supportive play-based environment where children feel safe to explore and experiment with new behaviors. For instance, in a classroom setting, when a teacher models sharing and cooperation during a group activity,

children observe these actions and are likely to imitate them. The supportive environment further reinforces these behaviors, making children more likely to adopt them as part of their repertoire.

In addition, Bandura's theory underscores the importance of reinforcement in learning. When children see positive outcomes or receive praise for certain behaviors, they are more likely to repeat those behaviors. For example, if a child sees that helping a friend results in verbal praise or a reward, they are likely to continue the helping behavior. This concept is crucial in play-based learning, where teachers can strategically model and reinforce behaviors such as cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. By doing so, teachers help children develop essential social skills in a natural and engaging context (Bandura, 2018).

Teachers' personal experiences and identities play a significant role in how they model these behaviors. For example, a teacher who values empathy and has experienced its benefits firsthand is more likely to emphasize and model empathetic behaviors in the classroom. This personal connection can enhance the effectiveness of playfulness approaches. When teachers bring their authentic selves into the classroom, they provide genuine examples for children to follow. This authenticity not only aids in observational learning but also builds trust and rapport between teachers and students, creating a conducive environment for effective learning. Understanding how teachers' backgrounds influence their teaching styles can provide valuable insights into enhancing educational practices, making them more responsive and effective (Adams et al., 2017).

This will support the study by providing a framework for integrating personal narratives with theoretical analysis, thereby identifying effective approaches for enhancing educational practices of playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being practices, and relationships. Understanding the role of teacher identity in shaping pedagogical approaches can

help develop more responsive and effective play-based learning and social-emotional learning programs. Such insights can inform teacher training programs, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and personal reflection in educational practices and philosophies. By acknowledging and leveraging their unique backgrounds, teachers can create more inclusive and supportive classroom environments that cater to the diverse needs of their students. This approach aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of modeling and observational learning. It also integrates Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, which considers the broader context in which learning and development occur. By examining the reciprocal relationship between teacher identity and educational practice, this study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of effective teaching strategies in early childhood education.

Ecological Theory of Development

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple layers of relationships that influence an individual's development within their community and society, which will be related to my personal narratives in the study (Bronfenbrenner, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory provides a broader context by examining the various systems that influence a child's development, including family dynamics, socioeconomic status, peer relationships, and societal norms. This theory posits that development is shaped by the interactions between a child and their multiple environments. This model includes the chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem, each representing different levels of influence on a child's development. The chronosystem encompasses the dimension of time, acknowledging that life transitions and historical events impact development. The macrosystem involves broader societal and cultural norms, while the

exosystem includes external environments that indirectly affect the child, such as parents' workplaces. The mesosystem consists of the interactions between different microsystems, such as home and school environments. Finally, the microsystem involves the immediate surroundings and direct interactions, including family, peers, and teachers.

In the context of playfulness, these systems interact to create a dynamic learning environment that meets the developmental needs of children. For instance, a supportive classroom (microsystem) that integrates playfulness can directly influence a child's behavior and emotional well-being. When teachers incorporate play therapy activities and social-emotional learning (SEL) into their teaching, they create a nurturing environment that helps children develop essential coping mechanisms and resilience. This approach is particularly beneficial for children who have experienced trauma, as it provides them with a safe space to process their experiences and build healthy relationships. For example, a child with ODD might benefit from a play-based intervention where they can practice emotional regulation and conflict resolution through role-playing scenarios.

Moreover, the ecological perspective encourages educators to consider the broader context in which disruptive behaviors occur. Disruptions within any of Bronfenbrenner's systems can significantly affect a child's behavior. For example, a dysfunctional family environment (microsystem) or socioeconomic hardships (exosystem) can lead to disruptive behaviors in the classroom. By understanding these broader influences, educators can tailor their interventions to address the root causes of these behaviors. For instance, educators might work with community organizations (exosystem) to provide additional support and resources for families facing economic challenges, thereby creating a more stable environment for the child.

The ecological model also emphasizes the importance of equity and inclusion. Many children from trauma backgrounds belong to minority or oppressed communities, making it crucial for educators to foster an inclusive classroom climate. By collaborating with families, schools, and community resources, educators can create a comprehensive support network that addresses the needs of these children. Playfulness then becomes a tool not only for academic instruction but also for promoting social-emotional growth, cultural enrichment, and community engagement. By integrating this perspective, the study can identify underlying factors contributing to the success or challenges of implementing play-based learning and social-emotional learning.

Play Theory

Play Theory emphasizes the essential role of play in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development in children. Smith and Pellegrini (2020) highlight that play is not merely a recreational activity but a crucial element of early childhood education. Their research supports the integration of play-based approaches in educational settings, underscoring how play contributes significantly to various developmental domains. Cognitively, play encourages exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving. It allows children to engage in activities that enhance their understanding of the world, develop critical thinking skills, and foster creativity. Socially, play provides opportunities for children to interact with peers, develop communication skills, and learn cooperation and negotiation. Emotionally, play helps children express their feelings, manage emotions, and build resilience.

Smith and Pellegrini (2020) argue that these benefits make play a vital component of a child's development, supporting the idea that educators should incorporate play-based learning and playfulness into their teaching practices. By doing so, they can create environments that not

only engage children but also promote their overall well-being and developmental growth. This study will utilize Play Theory to examine how teachers' approaches to play influence their effectiveness in promoting positive developmental outcomes.

Gaps in Existing Literature

In examining the literature on the intersection of teacher identity with playfulness, social-emotional learning, and mental health, several gaps become evident. First, while much research underscores the benefits of play-based learning for cognitive, social, and emotional development (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Whitebread & Basilio, 2019), there is a lack of studies that explore how teachers' personal identities and life experiences influence their implementation of playfulness. This gap suggests a need for further investigation into how educators' backgrounds and beliefs shape their teaching practices and interactions with students.

Moreover, although Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has been extensively used to study the broader environmental influences on child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), there is limited research that explicitly applies this framework, to understand the reciprocal relationship between playfulness and children's development. More studies are needed to explore how different ecological systems, such as family, community, and cultural contexts, interact with playfulness to affect children's behavioral and emotional outcomes.

Furthermore, while Bandura's Social Learning Theory highlights the importance of modeling and observational learning in developing social behaviors (Bandura, 2018), there is a lack of empirical research that examines the role of teachers as models in playfulness. Specifically, there is limited evidence on how teachers' modeling of social behaviors through play can influence children's development of skills such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution through playfulness.

Moreover, there is a notable lack of autoethnographic studies that explore these subjects within the context of early education classrooms. Autoethnography, which integrates personal experience with cultural analysis, offers a unique perspective on the influence of teacher identity on educational practices and is newer to the realm of acceptance as a qualitative study in education (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016). By using autoethnographic methods, researchers can provide rich, insider perspectives into how their personal narratives and identities intersect with their pedagogical approaches in playfulness, social-emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, and relationships, to provide effective holistic development for students. This approach can reveal insights into the challenges and successes teachers face, providing understanding and valuable perspectives that are often overlooked in traditional research.

Relevance to Autoethnography with Similar Studies

Autoethnographic studies explicitly focusing on early childhood education are relatively limited. It has only recently become an accepted form of qualitative research in the realm of education, but a few notable examples exist that provide valuable insights into the intersection of personal experiences and educational practices in this context. One significant study by Hyland (2017) explored the personal narratives of early childhood educators to understand how their identities and experiences shaped their teaching philosophies and practices. Hyland's work highlighted the emotional and relational dynamics in early childhood classrooms, emphasizing the importance of reflective practice and self-awareness in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments (Hyland, 2017).

Another relevant study by Pennington (2018) examined the experiences of early childhood educators in diverse classroom settings through an autoethnographic lens. Pennington's research focused on how teachers navigated cultural differences and integrated their

personal values and beliefs into their teaching. This study underscored the complexities of teaching in multicultural environments and the critical role of teacher identity in shaping pedagogical approaches and student relationships (Pennington, 2018). While it touched on aspects of play-based learning, the study primarily focused on the ideas of culturally sustaining pedagogy through play-based learning.

Additionally, Connolly (2019) conducted an autoethnographic study on the challenges and rewards of implementing play-based learning in early childhood education. Connolly's research provided a detailed account of the author's experiences as an early childhood educator, exploring the benefits of play-based learning for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The study also highlighted the barriers and resistance faced by educators in adopting play-based methodologies, offering practical insights for overcoming these challenges (Connolly, 2019).

These studies collectively contribute to the growing body of literature on autoethnography in early childhood education, demonstrating how personal narratives can illuminate the nuanced ways in which teacher identity and experiences influence educational practices. They provide a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between personal and professional identities in shaping early childhood education environments, emphasizing the need for reflective practice. However, these studies do not have any focus on teacher identity in conjunction with playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I chose an autoethnographic approach for this study because it uniquely blends personal narrative with cultural and professional context, offering deep insights into the complexities of my decades of experience in early childhood education. This approach is particularly valuable in early childhood education, where the interplay between teacher identity, pedagogical practices, and student development can be complex. Autoethnography provides a rich, first-person perspective that traditional research methods often overlook. It allows researchers to draw from their lived experiences to offer insights into their teaching practices and the underlying personal and cultural factors that shape these practices (Chang, 2016). This is crucial in early childhood education, where personal experiences and teacher identity significantly influence educational outcomes. For instance, Hyland (2017) highlighted how reflective practice and self-awareness, central to autoethnographic research, are essential for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Purpose

The purpose of this autoethnography is to explore and reflect on my identity and how it intersects with my classroom practices. Drawing on my experiences as an educator, I use personal narratives to analyze how my engagement with playfulness and social-emotional practices has shaped my teaching philosophy and influenced children's holistic development. By integrating theory with practice, this research bridges the gap between academic literature and classroom experience, offering actionable strategies for educators. In doing so, it also addresses a key gap in the literature: while much research affirms the benefits of play and social-emotional learning, few studies examine how teacher identity, teachers' beliefs, histories, and lived experiences shape the implementation of these practices (Bethell et al., 2019; Williams, 2021).

This autoethnographic approach contributes a first-person perspective to the field, highlighting the challenges and rewards of using playfulness in diverse classrooms. It underscores the need to support children's cognitive, emotional, and mental health through developmentally appropriate play while also advocating for the critical role of teacher identity in shaping those efforts. If this research helps even one educator or child by deepening understanding of the role of play and teacher identity in early childhood education, I have fulfilled its purpose in researching it.

Furthermore, the study seeks to contribute to the existing body of research by offering empirical evidence on the effectiveness of playfulness as a possible tool for promoting resilience, creativity, and social-emotional skills in young learners. This research also has potential implications for educational policy and teacher training programs, advocating for a stronger emphasis on play-based approaches and social-emotional learning in early childhood education curricula to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments (Murphy et al., 2021).

Autoethnographic Approach Design

The use of autoethnography for this study can be justified for several compelling reasons. Autoethnography uniquely integrates personal experience with cultural analysis as a research method, allowing for a deeply nuanced exploration of complex educational phenomena. This approach is particularly valuable in early childhood education, where the connections between teacher identity, pedagogical practices, and student development are complex. While traditional autoethnographic approaches have often been categorized as either analytic or evocative, recent scholars such as Keles (2023) advocate for a hybrid model that merges these perspectives. Analytic autoethnography seeks to maintain methodological rigor by systematically analyzing personal and cultural experiences, while evocative autoethnography prioritizes emotional

resonance and storytelling (Keles, 2023). Merging these approaches offers a more comprehensive framework that balances deep personal engagement with critical analysis, allowing for a richer exploration of complex sociocultural issues (Ellis et al., 2011).

This framework created by Keles (2023), is effective because autoethnography offers a rich, first-person perspective that traditional research methods often overlook. It allows researchers to draw from their lived experiences to offer insights into their teaching practices and the underlying personal and cultural factors that shape these practices (Chang, 2016). These factors are crucial in early childhood education, where individual experiences and teacher identity significantly influence educational outcomes. For instance, Hyland (2017) highlighted how reflective practice and self-awareness, central to autoethnographic research, are essential for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Another aspect of the framework is that autoethnography emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, where researchers critically examine their biases, assumptions, and positionalities. This reflexive process is vital for understanding the impact of teacher identity on the implementation of playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships. Pennington (2018) demonstrated how autoethnographic methods could illuminate the complexities of teaching in multicultural settings, providing a deeper understanding of how personal values and beliefs shape pedagogical approaches and interactions with students.

The use of Social Constructionism informs this autoethnographic study by framing knowledge and meaning as socially constructed through relationships, language, and shared experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). My personal narrative, memory work, and family interviews and communications are not isolated events, but culturally situated texts that reflect broader educational and institutional dynamics. Through journals, interviews, and parent

communications, I examine how concepts such as playfulness, teacher identity, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships are co-created in everyday experiences. This perspective supports the use of narrative as a legitimate data source and offers a philosophical framework.

The use of symbolic interactionism within the symbolic autoethnography also supports this design by emphasizing how meaning is constructed through social interaction and symbolic exchange (Blumer, 1969). My teacher identity is shaped and reshaped through daily experiences with children during play, with families during our interactions, and through the decisions I make in practice. These moments carry symbolic weight and reveal how values, roles, and practices are interpreted within their context. Analyzing these interactions through my narrative and reflections enables a deeper understanding of how my identity and practices evolve. This lens validates personal experience as essential to meaning making in early education.

Moreover, symbolic autoethnography allows for the deep exploration of personal and emotional aspects of teaching, which are often underrepresented in educational research (Lapadat, 2017). Connolly (2019) used autoethnography to explore the challenges and rewards of implementing play-based learning through the lens of cultures, providing valuable insights into the barriers and resistance educators face. This personal narrative approach can uncover the emotional and relational dynamics that influence educational practices, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to successful play-based learning environments.

The personal narrative is the heart of this dissertation, intertwined with reflective analysis, memory work, excerpts of family interviews and surveys, and an examination of the role of teacher identity in shaping pedagogical practices. It provides a unique perspective on how

play fosters relationships, emotional regulation, and mental well-being in early childhood education. Through the integration of personal experiences, or teacher identity, and theoretical insights, this study aligns with Rogers (2021) in exploring how play facilitates strong teacher-child and teacher-family relationships, enhancing social-emotional learning outcomes and overall holistic child development guided by the research questions of this study.

Throughout this study, readers will notice intentional shifts between a personal narrative voice and a more formal, academic voice. These transitions are a deliberate methodological choice consistent with the principles of autoethnographic inquiry in dissertations. As an approach that weaves together the personal and the cultural, autoethnography requires the researcher to move fluidly between storytelling, critical reflection, and scholarly analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). The integration of personal experiences, journal excerpts, and memory work with thematic coding and theoretical interpretation reflects the dual role of the researcher as both participant and analyst (Chang, 2016). Rather than viewing these shifts in tone or perspective as inconsistencies, they are intended to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and professional insights that shape this study.

As a result, using autoethnography in this study is justified because it provides a holistic and comprehensive view of the role of teacher identity in early childhood education. It allows for a deep exploration of personal experiences, reflexivity, and emotional dynamics, which are crucial for understanding and enhancing playfulness, social-emotional learning, and mental health and well-being practices. In this study, Geertz's (1973, p. 6) “thick description” concept provides a rich, detailed narrative that captures the complexities and nuances of the researcher’s experiences in the educational environment. This approach allows for a more profound understanding of the cultural and emotional dynamics at play, making the research both

evocative and insightful (Geertz, 1973). It aligns with the growing body of literature recognizing the value of integrating personal narratives with cultural and educational analysis (Chang, 2016; Connolly, 2019; Hyland, 2017; Pennington, 2018).

Research Questions

Understanding the role of teacher identity in educational practices, particularly in playfulness and social-emotional learning, is critical to enhancing early childhood education. Teachers' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and professional expertise significantly shape their approaches to fostering children's development. Exploring how these elements intersect with playfulness and social-emotional learning is essential for comprehending how these practices influence the holistic development of young learners. The following research questions guide this exploration, aiming to deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in these educational practices.

1. How do my personal experiences, cultural background, and professional insights inform my teacher identity and enhance my approach to playfulness and social-emotional development for children's growth and learning?
2. How does my facilitation and participation in playfulness impact children's social-emotional skills, mental health, and well-being?
3. How does my practice of implementing and engaging in playfulness affect my interpersonal relationships with children and families?

Positionality Statement and Reflexivity

My positionality as a middle-aged white woman from a low socioeconomic background, a first-generation college student, and a second-generation immigrant to the United States significantly informs how I engage with this research. Growing up in an urban environment

marked by neglect and economic hardship shaped my deep belief in the transformative power of education and the importance of equitable opportunities for all children. Over time, my lived experience evolved as I moved into a middle-class lifestyle as a married, heterosexual, cisgender woman and mother, offering me a complex perspective on social mobility, access, and systemic inequities in education. As a veteran early childhood educator and kindergarten teacher of twenty years with training in play-based learning, social-emotional development, educational leadership, counseling, and literacy, I bring a multifaceted lens to this work. These professional and academic experiences influence how I interpret data, particularly around themes of playfulness, relationships, social-emotional learning, and mental health and well-being, and are grounded in an interpretivist stance that values meaning-making within social contexts (Ezzy, 2013). My commitment to constructivism, believing knowledge is built through interaction and reflection, shapes how I view children's learning and my role as a researcher (Vygotsky, 1978). I recognize that my strong beliefs in playfulness and social-emotional learning are not neutral; they reflect personal and philosophical commitments that could introduce bias into how I interpret the data. However, I actively engage in reflexivity throughout this study, acknowledging how my background, identity, and assumptions shape the research process and findings. By doing so, I aim to balance my insights with critical reflection, striving for a credible and transparent analysis while embracing the personal nature of autoethnographic inquiry (Berger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The participants of this autoethnographic study primarily include the researcher, who draws upon over 20 years of experience in early childhood education across various roles, including early childhood educator, special education teacher, Head Start director, public school

kindergarten teacher, instructional coach, teacher mentor, and adjunct instructor. The researcher also offers narratives from her childhood experiences, which intersect with classroom experiences. Additionally, the study incorporates feedback and insights from families as participants will be gathered through interviews and other forms of communication, as well as observations of children's behaviors and interactions within the classroom setting.

Including family feedback and children's reactions offers a more comprehensive view of these practices' impact on children's holistic development. In this autoethnographic study, I purposely selected three families for interviews as participants, focusing on those who have had all three of their children in my classrooms over the years. They each have children within the same age groups. Purposeful selection of families in an autoethnography is crucial because it allows the researcher to focus on participants who provide rich, diverse, and contextually relevant insights into the study's themes (Patton, 2015). This method aligns with the autoethnographic approach, which values depth over breadth, enabling deep exploration of complex, personal experiences. By choosing families with varying experiences, the researcher can illustrate the multifaceted nature of playfulness and its impact on children's social-emotional development, mental health, and relationships (Patton, 2015). These families were chosen to provide diverse perspectives on early childhood issues such as playfulness, social-emotional development, and mental health. Each family represents different experiences and challenges:

- The Allen Family*: All three children have struggled with mental health issues, providing insight into the impact of early interventions and supportive classroom environments.
- The Brown Family*: Initially, none of the children had mental health concerns, but the dynamics changed when the father was diagnosed with a rare cancer.

Then, the family faced additional challenges after the youngest child was adopted from a background of abuse. Then, they dealt with the father's tragic death in a climbing accident. This family offers a perspective on how sudden life changes and trauma can affect children's development.

- The Coats Family*: This family has children who are considered well-adjusted developmentally and meet all typical developmental milestones. Their experience will show how playfulness and social-emotional learning can support overall development, even in children without significant mental health struggles.

*pseudonyms

The variety in these families' experiences within the setting of my kindergarten classroom allows for a comprehensive examination of how different life circumstances influence children's development and the effectiveness of playfulness and social-emotional learning in supporting their needs. To protect the identities of all participants, especially the families and children involved, the assigned pseudonyms are used in all references to them within the study. Observations and personal feedback will be presented in a manner that ensures confidentiality and respects the privacy of those who contributed their experiences to this research. This approach thoroughly explores how these practices evolve in different educational settings, offering deeply personal and broadly applicable insights across diverse educational contexts.

Setting

In this autoethnographic study, I incorporate personal memories and reflections from various educational settings, including Head Start programs, university lab schools, private early education centers, and public-school classrooms, with a majority being from my time in a public-school kindergarten classroom over the last nine years. These settings provide a rich backdrop

for examining the interplay between personal narratives, professional practices which are the backbone of my teacher identity, and implementing playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health, and well-being support, and building relationships in early childhood education (Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011).

Reflections from my seven years in Head Start, a federally funded early childhood education program serving low-income families in the southern region, provide a rich context for understanding the challenges faced by children who have experienced adversity, including poverty and trauma. Working at Head Start taught me the value of community engagement and advocacy, and how to tailor play-based learning to meet the needs of children facing significant socioeconomic and developmental challenges (Chang, 2016).

In the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma City Community College lab school environment, I had the opportunity to experiment with play-based approaches in a setting focused on research, observation, and teacher training for three years. This setting was instrumental in deepening my understanding of developmental theories and gave me hands-on experience in connecting theory to practice (Ellis et al., 2011). It provided a structured yet innovative space for incorporating social-emotional learning into everyday activities and understanding the complexities of teacher-student interactions.

My experiences in private early education centers for four years in the Southside of Oklahoma City offered insights into how playfulness can vary depending on resources and parental expectations. The flexibility of private education allowed for more creative, individualized approaches to teaching. It highlighted the role that family dynamics and expectations play in implementing playfulness, providing a deeper understanding of how to work closely with families to holistically support their children's growth.

The most prevalent setting within my study, where I have spent the last nine years, is my current setting within a suburban public school in Oklahoma. It has its distinct landscape, which is the main setting. It is a Title 1 school, where over the years fifty-five percent to sixty-three percent of the students have been on free and reduced priced meals program, serving a diverse population of approximately two-hundred and seventy students, ranging from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade (U.S. News and World Report, n.d.). The kindergarten classroom is designed to cater to young learners with a mix of cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and a notable number of students with special needs who are within the age range of five to seven years old. The classroom includes an average of seventeen students each academic school year. It is a fully inclusive classroom which has served children diagnosed with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), English language learners (EL), those exhibiting defiance behaviors, and others with suspected learning delays year after year.

The physical layout of the kindergarten classroom is designed to promote learning through play, which is uncommon of kindergarten classrooms throughout the district. I have worked hard as I have learned through practices over the years to create a space to support play. There are designated areas for different activities, such as a reading loft, a sensory play area, a creative arts area, and an inviting space for group activities. These different centers help facilitate a structured yet flexible learning environment where students can engage in various play-based activities. The classroom is equipped with materials that support academic learning and social-emotional development, such as manipulatives for math, art supplies for creative expression, and sensory tools for students needing additional support in regulating emotions. The classroom environment offers a comprehensive setting to explore the role of teacher identity, playfulness, and their impact on social-emotional growth and mental health in early childhood education.

Along with how playfulness affects relationships, this diverse and inclusive environment provides an authentic context for understanding the complexities and dynamics of fostering positive developmental outcomes for all students (Williams, 2021).

Data Collection and Procedures

In the data collection process of this autoethnographic study, parent interviews were supplemented by personal narratives, classroom reflections through memory work, various parent communications and feedback in surveys. A data matrix was developed to organize the various qualitative sources used in the study. Table 1 presents these data sources and how they contributed to the study.

Table 1

Data Matrix of Qualitative Sources: Data Sources, Types, Themes, and Examples

Data Source	Amount Collected, When, and From	Type of Data	Themes Found	Example Quote or Entry
Parent Interviews	3 Families interviewed from December 2024-January 2025	Interview Transcripts	Playfulness, Joy, SEL, Relationships, Teacher Identity supported	"He comes home and reenacts the entire story through play" (Parent interview, 2025).
Parent Communications	4 Emails, 8 messages from parents on Seesaw, 5 Posts about me on Facebook, 22 Surveys from the last 8 years	Written Feedback	Teacher-Family Relationship, Joy, Mental Health	"Thank you for helping him feel safe and excited to come to school" (Parent communication, n.d.).
Personal Journal	81 entries about practices/education related, from the	Reflective Writing	Teacher Identity, Playfulness,	"I saw her light up when she finally shared a toy for the first

	last 8 years from Self		Joy, SEL, Mental Health	time" (Personal journal, n.d.)
Memory Work	20 written memory work pieces about practice/education from last 14 years from Self	Retrospective Narrative	Playfulness, Relationships, Joy, SEL, Teacher Identity, Mental Health	"As a child, I used Disney play to escape and process emotions" (Memory work, 2025).

These additional sources enriched the autoethnographic narrative by providing a more comprehensive view of the research context. For example, interviews with parents offered insights into family dynamics and children's experiences outside the classroom in relation to how my practices were supported. Reflexive practices, including memory work and journaling, were also conducted, focusing on student interactions and the implementation of playful approaches. Recalling these moments helped capture the dynamics of the classroom environment's dynamics and provided context for personal narratives (Patton, 2015). These documents offered evidence of student progress, parental engagement, and the broader social context of the student's learning experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

By integrating these sources, the study presents a multi-faceted narrative that reflects the complexity of educational practices and the diverse experiences of the teacher. This approach allows for a richer understanding of the impact of playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health support, and relationships in early childhood education, making the findings more robust and grounded in the lived realities of the participants (Patton, 2015). It also allows for triangulation of data, thereby enhancing validity of the findings. By incorporating both qualitative and narrative data, the study provides a holistic understanding of the impact of playfulness and social-emotional learning in early childhood education (Tracy, 2010).

Data Sources

Parent Interviews

Three parent interviews were conducted in early January 2025 to complement these retrospective data sources, selected purposefully to represent diverse family backgrounds and experiences (Patton, 2015). They were conducted using a semi-structured interview process. This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring topics while ensuring that key areas of interest were covered. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in qualitative research as they allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions while still maintaining focus on the research questions (Cohen et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews allow for exploring parents' unique experiences and perspectives while guiding the conversation toward the research objectives. The parent interview questions were purposefully developed to align with the central research questions guiding this autoethnographic study. As the researcher, my familiarity with key concepts in early education, such as play-based learning, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships, and teacher identity emerged from my professional and academic experiences. It influenced the direction and structure of the questions.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using *Otter,* which is an application used online to record and transcribe audio conversations in real time (Otter.ai, n.d.). This method is well-suited for autoethnography as it provides rich, qualitative data that can reveal the nuanced impacts of playfulness on children's development and family dynamics (Kallio et al., 2016). These interviews included families with children facing mental health challenges, those who have experienced significant life changes, and families with children considered well-adjusted, all having three children who were in the same age groupings. This selection process ensures a comprehensive exploration of the themes under study, consistent with the reflexive nature of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). The parent interview questionnaire and protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Personal Journals and Reflections

In the data collection process of this autoethnographic study, multiple qualitative methods were employed to construct and gather rich personal narratives consistent with the principles of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). The primary methods include personal journaling, memory work, and reflective writing, which allow the researcher to explore and document their experiences and emotional responses over time. As Kuhn (1995) outlined, memory work will be used to reconstruct and analyze significant memories related to the researcher's teaching practices and interactions within the classroom.

I have employed multiple sources to collect my personal narratives, each adding depth and diversity to the data. Journals have been a consistent tool, documenting my thoughts, reflections, and emotions over the last seventeen years, offering a raw and honest insight into my teaching journey (Chang, 2016). While they were not dated, they were organized in chronological order. My mentor in education, Judy Vasiloff, introduced me to this practice early on in my career to *"control the chaos from the day,"* she said. Over the years, I have tried to write weekly, or anytime a situation stood out to me, or during times I was struggling mentally to process. The writing is not formal in any way and consists of anecdotal records, self-reflections, and sediments of hope.

Another source of data I reflected upon was social media posts from *Seesaw* and *Facebook,* which have served as an archive of moments shared publicly by my families I serve, capturing my perspectives at specific times and allowing for reflection on how my thoughts and practices have evolved (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I pulled quotes from my school sites public *Facebook* page. I am fortunate in having all these archived moments, which overwhelmingly reflect positive and affirming feedback from families, students, and colleagues. Notably, no one

has openly expressed dissatisfaction with my teaching practices. Lastly, memories, reconstructed through reflective writing and memory work, as described by Kuhn (1995), offer a means to connect past experiences to present practices, allowing for a richer understanding of my development as an educator. Rather than being cited directly, these sources will serve to find themes and guide analysis. This multi-faceted approach provides a comprehensive collection of personal narratives, each contributing to a nuanced exploration of my teaching experiences.

Parent Communications

In addition to personal reflections, past surveys collected from families and students will be analyzed in a reflexive manner to provide a broader understanding of the educational environment and the relationships between the researcher, students, and families. These surveys offer valuable insights into the participants' perceptions and experiences over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, past family emails and social media posts from platforms like Facebook and Seesaw will be incorporated, as these sources reflect ongoing communication and feedback that have influenced the researcher's practices and perspectives.

Over the past fourteen years, anonymous parent surveys, such as the "Family Questionnaire," have been instrumental in shaping my teaching practice. For this study, I only reviewed only the surveys from the last eight years, as this aligns with the timeline of attendance of the children from the families in my interviews. Over the past eight years, one hundred and fifty-three surveys were distributed to families of my students at the end of each school year, with an envelope to seal the survey in, which parents could return to a basket available at drop-off in the mornings. I am not at this drop-off time and have no way of knowing who turns in each survey. Not all surveys are returned. Of the one hundred and fifty-three surveys, only sixty-seven were returned. Only twenty-two of the surveys were used due to only analyzing the comments

section and not all returned surveys had written comments. The survey can be found in Appendix A. These surveys provided quantitative feedback on key areas of early childhood professional practice, as outlined by the Council for Professional Recognition and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Parents rated specific aspects of classroom quality, such as safety, communication, creativity, and social skills, on a scale Likert-type scale from 1 to 3, indicating areas needing improvement or strengths. This type of scale is used to measure attitudes or perceptions by providing a range of response options, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement or satisfaction with different aspects of the teacher's performance (McLeod, 2019). The surveys also included an open section for comments, which is the only section used in the surveys to analyze regarding this study to maintain the integrity of using qualitative data and not quantitative data from Likert scales. Of the sixty-seven returned, only twenty-two had comments in the open section to use for parent communications in this study. By collecting and analyzing this feedback, I have been able to reflect on my teaching approach annually and adjust as necessary to better meet the needs of my students and their families. This reflective practice has been essential in ensuring a responsive and evolving learning environment that supports both children's academic growth and emotional well-being (NAEYC, 2024; Council for Professional Recognition, 2020). These materials will not be directly cited due to their reflexive and interpretive nature, the confidential context in which they were collected, and inability to attain direct permission from those who completed them. This is consistent with the interpretive and ethical flexibility of autoethnographic research (Ellis et al., 2011).

Timeline

The timeline for this research was structured to ensure thorough completion of each stage. From mid-November 2024 to December 2024, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) submission process took place for approval of parent interviews, with the approval happening on December 18, 2024. This step was essential to address ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent from participants, protecting their privacy, and ensuring the study meets all ethical guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After this time, potential participants received IRB-approved consent forms to sign, which provided details about the study, their rights as participants, and any potential risks or benefits. This ensured participants were well-informed and could make an educated decision about their involvement (Patton, 2015).

Following IRB approval, the data collection phase began with parent interviews in early January 2025. These interviews were designed to gather rich, qualitative data on family experiences related to the themes of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional development, mental health and well-being, and relationships in early childhood education within my current setting of a public-school Kindergarten classroom. I intentionally chose to begin with the parent interviews to include the voices of families, providing an external perspective that could later be contextualized through my own personal narratives and classroom reflections. In qualitative inquiry, starting with participant interviews can offer an anchor for identifying emerging patterns and shaping reflexive insights in narrative-based research (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019). The interviews were conducted in a manner that encouraged participants to share their perspectives openly while maintaining confidentiality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data analysis phase took place next, running from January to May 2025. The data collected through interviews and other qualitative methods were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved hand-coding and categorizing the data to identify recurring themes and

patterns. This approach ensures the findings are grounded in the participants' lived experiences, a crucial aspect of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

In early February 2025 - June 2025, I began writing up the data analysis and discussion sections. This involved synthesizing the findings and viewing them with the theoretical framework lens to provide a comprehensive discussion of the implications for early childhood education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phase helped draw connections between the data and existing literature, highlighting the significance of the study's contributions.

The research study concluded with the dissertation defense in July 2025. During this final step, the research findings were presented and discussed, particularly their implications for educational practices, teacher identity, and playfulness. This structured timeline, supported by careful planning and adherence to ethical research practices, ensured the research was comprehensive and contributed meaningfully to the field of early childhood education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the review of the parent interviews. This purposeful choice aligned with autoethnographic principles of seeking multiple perspectives on cultural practices (Ellis et al., 2011). Although my professional knowledge had shaped my initial focus areas, I wanted to ground my analysis in the experiences of those who observed my teaching from the outside. Thus, the parent interviews allowed me to discover whether my internal understanding of my practices resonated with the families' experiences, providing either validation or new insights to guide my analysis of personal reflections and communications (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Chang, 2016). The codes generated inductively from those interviews were then used in

the analysis of the additional data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). This process is further detailed below. Memo writing was also used throughout the coding process to document evolving reflections and insights, deepening the analysis, and enhancing the richness of the themes (Charmaz, 2014; Ezzy, 2013).

Thematic Analysis

This study utilized a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, combining Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, and Gale et al.'s (2013) framework method, ensuring consistency while allowing flexibility in coding and interpretation and balancing inductive and deductive structures. Thematic analysis was conducted on parent interviews following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework. This method was particularly well-suited for an autoethnographic study, allowing for a deeply personal yet analytically rigorous exploration of emerging themes of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships.

First, the parent interview data were reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity, making initial memo notes, and recognizing potential themes. The second phase involved hand coding, a process of labeling meaningful segments of data with descriptive codes that aligned with the research questions and viewing through the reflexive lens theoretical frameworks. Third, patterns within the coded data were examined to group related concepts into broader thematic categories. These resulted in overarching themes. I found color coordinating these emerging themes was helpful. The fourth phase required refining the themes by ensuring internal coherence and distinctiveness, achieved through thematic comparison across different data sources. The fifth phase involved defining and contextualizing each theme to ensure its relevance to the research questions, creating a codebook using the Framework Method commonly used in education

research (Gale et al., 2013). While my analysis remained recursive and reflexive, revisiting data throughout to refine themes, I did not employ constant comparative analysis in the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A priori coding from the codebook were then used to analyze the remaining data sets, with themes interpreted through the lens of key theoretical frameworks, including Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Play Theory (Bandura, 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Smith & Pellegrini, 2020) and noted in a notebook. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a coherent narrative, integrating self-reflection, participant perspectives, and classroom experiences to provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded interpretation.

The analysis of personal connections in this autoethnography involved a great deal of reflective examination of the researcher's lived experiences, emotions, and insights in relation to the study's themes. This reflective process drew upon my personal narratives of personal journals, memory work, and interactions with students and families to identify meaningful patterns and connections (Chang, 2016).

Coding and Categorization. Coding was the primary tool for organizing and interpreting the data collected from parent interviews, ensuring the analysis is systematic and flexible. Each piece of data was labeled with codes that reflected its content, facilitating the categorization of information into broader themes. This approach not only aided in managing large volumes of qualitative data but also ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences, a key aspect of autoethnography (Terry et al., 2017). The data was coded using inductive and deductive approaches, allowing themes to emerge naturally while applying a lens of preexisting theoretical frameworks. Initial coding of parent interviews involved examining the data line by line and identifying key phrases and concepts. Recent

studies (Nowell et al., 2017) highlight the importance of this method in ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data. This method is ideal for autoethnography as it provides a structured yet flexible approach, enabling deep and detailed exploration of complex educational and personal themes central to the study (Charmaz, 2014). It also allowed for reflexive refinement, where coding was revisited multiple times, and new understandings were applied, enhancing the richness of the thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2014). All these processes can be viewed in Table 2: *Data analysis process* used in this study.

Table 2

Data analysis process

Phase	Description	Source
Familiarization	Engaged deeply with transcripts, journals, and classroom reflections to become familiar with the data.	Braun & Clarke (2019)
Memo Writing	Used memos to track analytic decisions, insights, and evolving interpretations throughout coding.	Charmaz (2014); Ezzy (2013)
Initial Coding	Applied inductive, open coding to parent interviews; codes emerged directly from participants' voices.	Braun & Clarke (2019); Charmaz (2014); Ezzy (2013)
Theme Development	Reviewed and organized initial codes into potential themes through iterative engagement.	Braun & Clarke (2019)
Theme Finalization	Defined and named final themes: teacher identity, playfulness, SEL, mental health, relationships, joy Created codebook.	Braun & Clarke (2019); Gale et al. (2013)
A Priori Coding	Applied deductive predefined codes from codebook to other data sources (journals, parent communications, surveys).	Ezzy (2013)

	using a theoretical framework for support.	
Thematic Comparison	Compared codes and categories across data sets, refining theme development.	Braun & Clarke (2019); Saldaña (2021)

A Priori Coding Used. A priori coding using a codebook was used for other data sources, personal journals, memory work, parent communication, and family surveys based on themes derived from the interviews and viewed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks of the study (Ezzy, 2013). These frameworks included Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020), Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994). Pre-established codes derived from the parent interviews were applied to guide interpretation in a consistent and theoretically informed way. Throughout the coding process, the thematic comparison was also used to revisit and refine codes to ensure that as new data was added or reexamined, existing codes and categories were compared, revised, or expanded as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). For example, emergent themes from the parent interviews were compared with journal entries and memory work to identify patterns, tensions, or contrasts in how playfulness was understood and experienced across all stakeholder perspectives. By combining Braun and Clarke's (2019) initial coding and a priori coding from the codebook created from the framework of Gale et al. (2013), grounded in thematic analysis and supported by thematic comparison, this study ensured both inductive flexibility and theoretical alignment. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the data and contributed to the development of key themes presented in the findings.

Theoretical Frameworks Applied in Analysis

Integrating Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory, and Play Theory into the autoethnographic study guided the analysis of collected data by offering a multi-dimensional understanding of how playfulness influences child development. Bandura's theory helped to identify how observational learning and modeling by teachers impact children's social behaviors. Bronfenbrenner's model facilitated the exploration of how environmental factors like family and community shape children's development within play-based contexts. Play Theory further supports examining how play contributes to cognitive, social, and emotional growth, emphasizing its role in holistic child development (Bandura, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Smith & Pellegrini, 2020).

Rather than embedding theoretical labels directly in my formal codebook, I used a more reflexive process aligned with autoethnographic practice. As I reviewed data, I recorded reflections in a notebook, noting when a specific moment or theme connected clearly to a theoretical concept. To keep track of this visually, I sometimes wrote shorthand initials in the margins. Those initials are SLT for Social Learning Theory, ECO for Ecological Theory, and PT for Play Theory. This process helped me begin to see which theories consistently aligned with certain patterns, like modeling compassion (SLT), family-school dynamics (ECO), or imaginative play (PT). These informal annotations supported a layered analysis that honored the complexity of lived experience and theory interplay (Ellis et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2021).

These theories collectively provided a framework for analyzing how personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and professional practices intersect in the classroom to support children's development. By applying these theories to the emerging themes, the study was able to generate insights that reflected individual narratives and aligned with broader

developmental and educational principles, ensuring a comprehensive and culturally responsive approach to early childhood education research (Ezzy, 2013).

Reflexivity in Autoethnographic Research

Memory work was a crucial component of the analysis, providing a structured way to reflect on past experiences and their influence on present-day teaching practices. As Kuhn (1995) explains, memory work involves reconstructing significant moments and examining how they shape identity, behaviors, and decision-making. Through memory recall and reflexive writing, I revisited pivotal moments in my career, childhood, and personal development that have contributed to my pedagogical philosophy and interactions with students and families. These memories were analyzed alongside classroom observations and personal journals, allowing for a deeper understanding of the connections between past experiences and present teaching methodologies.

Memory work also helped bridge gaps in data by filling in emotional and cognitive aspects of experiences that may not have been explicitly documented at the time. To align memory work with other data sources, I often wrote margin notes about brief reflections or emotional reactions on other data sources. These handwritten annotations helped connect past experiences with present insights and supported the layering of meaning across multiple data types (Ellis et al., 2011).

Data Triangulation

To enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study, data triangulation was employed, drawing from multiple data sources (Denzin, 2012). Triangulation strengthened the findings by allowing for cross-verification of themes across different qualitative data sets, ensuring that interpretations were not limited to a single perspective. This approach balanced the

depth of discovery provided by inductive parent interviews with the structured efficiency of analyzing written artifacts such as journals, surveys, and parent communications.

Personal narratives and journals provided a firsthand account of experiences, emotions, and reflections, offering insight into how my teacher identity evolved over time. Parent interviews captured family perspectives on playfulness, teacher relationships, and their child's social-emotional growth, offering an external validation of observed patterns. Reflecting on classroom experiences allowed for direct analysis of playful interactions, student problem-solving, and social-emotional learning in action, strengthening the connection between theory and practice. Additionally, surveys and past reflections of parent communications provided longitudinal insights into recurring themes, ensuring that identified patterns were not isolated incidents but consistent aspects of my teaching practice.

By using a codebook developed through inductive coding of interviews, these additional data sources were analyzed using a priori coding, allowing for thematic consistency while remaining open to new or nuanced variations (Gale et al., 2013). Thematic comparison across data types ensured analytical rigor and reflexive memo writing throughout the process, further validated analytic decisions and enhanced the depth of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

Although traditional inter-rater reliability measures were not formally applied, collaborative coding was conducted with my dissertation advisor on the parent interview data (Saldaña, 2021). We worked side by side to discuss, compare, and refine codes, which added an additional layer of analytic credibility and ensured that coding decisions were grounded in both participant language and theoretical alignment. This collaborative process enhanced the

trustworthiness of the data interpretation while maintaining the subjective and reflective stance essential to autoethnographic inquiry.

By integrating thematic analysis, memory work, reflexivity, and data triangulation, the analysis ensured a multi-layered and contextually rich interpretation of teacher identity and its effects on playfulness, social-emotional development, mental health and well-being, and relationships. The findings were not only informed by my reflections but also reinforced by family feedback, student interactions, and theoretical frameworks, ensuring a rigorous and meaningful contribution to the discourse on early childhood education, playfulness, and teacher identity.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The limitations of this autoethnographic study included potential bias due to the researcher's dual role as both participant and observer, which may affect the objectivity and interpretation of data (Ellis et al., 2011). Additionally, the findings may have limited generalizability to broader populations because of the focus on the researcher's unique experiences (Chang, 2016). Ethical concerns were significant, particularly regarding confidentiality and consent, as personal narratives often involved others whose privacy must be protected (Adams et al., 2017). The iterative and reflexive nature of autoethnography required ongoing self-examination, which can be time-consuming and emotionally demanding (Ellis et al., 2011).

Another limitation of this study lies in the unique degree of professional autonomy I have experienced in my teaching role over the past eight years, particularly in my current position. I have had the freedom to make instructional decisions, adapt curriculum, and implement playful practices that align with my educational philosophy. This autonomy has allowed for the

consistent integration of developmentally appropriate, playful learning and teaching. However, I recognize that this level of professional autonomy is not universal. In a more restrictive educational setting, teachers may be required to adhere to a particular curriculum, standardized pacing guides, or administrative mandates that limit their ability to implement these practices. In such instances, I would advocate for and justify my approach by clearly articulating its rationale and demonstrating its effectiveness through student outcomes, engagement, and developmental progress (Hyland, 2017). Educators in these environments can still advocate for playful learning by collecting data, sharing success stories, and aligning their practices with standards in a meaningful way, as I have over the years with playfulness. While my experiences reflect a setting of considerable professional freedom, the strategies and insights gained through this study can support other educators in making a case for the value of playful and joyful learning, despite systemic limitations.

Ethical Considerations in this Autoethnography

This study managed ethical considerations through several steps to ensure confidentiality, consent, and appropriate representation of all participants. First, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including families being interviewed. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix D. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, methods, and potential risks, with consent forms provided and signed to ensure they understood their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation (Ellis, 2007).

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used instead of real names, and any identifying information was removed or altered to prevent recognition (Ellis et al., 2011). This commitment to confidentiality extended to the handling of sensitive information throughout the

study, with careful consideration given to what details were necessary for research and how they were presented to respect participants' privacy (Chang, 2016).

Before any data collection began, the research was submitted for approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the University of Oklahoma. The IRB reviewed the consent process, data collection methods, and confidentiality protections to ensure compliance with ethical standards and safeguard participants' rights and welfare (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018). Approval was granted December 18, 2024

Reflexive Practices. Reflexive practices (Braun & Clarke, 2019) are integral to ensuring authenticity and rigor in this autoethnographic study. Rather than relying solely on structured journaling, the researcher engaged in an ongoing process of reflection, often mentally processing experiences, questioning assumptions, and examining emotional responses throughout the research process. These reflections were deepened through informal conversations with trusted colleagues, which provided critical feedback. While much of this reflexive work was internal or dialogic, the researcher also recorded occasional memos to capture emotional reactions. This combined approach of blending introspection, dialogue, and written memos supported a transparent and critically engaged stance consistent with the values of reflexive qualitative inquiry (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Engaging in these reflexive practices contributes significantly to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Continuous reflexivity facilitates a more nuanced and ethical engagement with the data, as the researcher remained cognizant of their influence on the research outcomes (Johnson & Parry, 2020). This ongoing process of self-scrutiny and adjustment helps produce authentic, reliable, and reflective findings of the studied social contexts. Ultimately, reflexivity strengthens the research by fostering a rigorous and transparent approach that

acknowledged and addressed the interplay between the researcher's identity and the research process.

Additionally, member-checking with in-person meetings validated findings with participants (parents who were interviewed), ensuring that interpretations aligned with their experiences, enhancing the study's trustworthiness and credibility (Birt et al., 2016). These practices are integral to producing reliable and meaningful findings in early childhood education.

Throughout the study, the researcher engaged in continuous ethical reflexivity, critically examining how the research process might impact participants and making necessary adjustments to minimize harm while maintaining respect and integrity. This ongoing reflection is crucial to maintaining ethical rigor in autoethnographic research (Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011).

Conclusion

This methodology chapter has detailed the rationale for using an autoethnographic approach, highlighting its relevance to exploring the study purpose. By integrating personal narratives and thematic analysis, this study ensures a comprehensive exploration of the research questions (Chang, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical considerations and reflexivity were foundational to maintaining the study's credibility and integrity, setting the stage for the data analysis, narrative, and discussion chapters. These chapters explore the insights gained, providing a thorough understanding of how these educational practices impact early childhood development.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the results of a thematic analysis grounded in a qualitative, autoethnographic methodology. Three major data sources were included: parent Interviews, personal experiences and reflections, and parent communications. To maintain methodological transparency and analytic rigor, this section begins with a brief recap of the coding strategies and analytical processes used.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis model, supported by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This allowed for the ongoing refinement of codes and categories across data sets. Initial codes were employed first with the parent interview transcripts, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' voices without preconceived structure. Then, these codes were reviewed and organized into potential themes, and finally, refined and defined through iterative engagement with the data.

Each of these themes is presented in the sections that follow, supported by excerpts from parent interviews, personal experiences and reflections, and parent communications. These findings highlight the relational and emotional dimensions of early childhood education and illustrate how play and connection contribute to children's development and well-being.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Parent Interviews

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis approach, I systematically analyzed the family interview transcripts through open coding, which generated initial codes. These codes clustered into six distinct subthemes that emerged across all interviews: nurturing, playful, SEL (social-emotional learning) driven, supportive of mental health and well-being, relationship builder, and joyful.

Each subtheme directly reflected core aspects of my teaching identity and practices. For example, nurturing captured my commitment to creating emotionally safe spaces; playful described how I intentionally embed play into every lesson; SEL driven showed my focus on modeling and reinforcing social-emotional skills; supportive of mental health and well-being spoke to the ways I provide stress-relief, and coping tools; relationship builder underscored my efforts to collaborate closely with families and build community in the classroom; and joyful revealed my belief that joy itself is pedagogically powerful. Table 3 organizes the resulting subthemes, initial codes, and representative quotes across the Allen, Brown, and Coats family interviews.

Table 3

Parent interview findings

Sub Theme	Initial Codes	Coats Family*	Brown Family*	Allen Family*
Nurturing	Creating magic, Showing love, Individualized and Seen, Empowered, Disney, Joyful	Valued responsive, nurturing teacher; described teacher as someone who created a safe space for emotional healing "You gave them the freedom, the love, and the acceptance they needed." "The love and the acceptance	Noted strong teacher presence during child's trauma and transitions; emphasized feeling seen and supported "They felt really included and supported in what they were learning."	Admired teacher's consistency and energy; described classroom as "magical" and "structured with heart" "It's a magical little beginning of school situation." "They were always excited to see you, you are their favorite

		and the openness gave them the confidence they needed to really understand who they wanted to be."	"You recognized each student individually, that was really cool."	people to come visit."
Playful	Engaged, Excited to Learn with Play, Communication, Joyful	Children thrived with sensory and imaginative play; parents appreciated how play was used for coping and connection "Every day was a playful exchange of knowledge." "You make it so fun they don't even notice it's learning."	Play helped with emotional transitions and adaptation after the father's illness and loss "They were just more excited about the learning they were doing when they got to play." "The pumpkin patch project was really cool they got to create their whole little world."	Play was a natural, joyful part of learning; parents felt it enhanced their children's motivation and curiosity "They always are excited to come to school because of the fun they know they're going to have." "They would pretend with their friends, play games, dance, and sing."
SEL Driven	Empowered, Responsive Teacher, Communication, Individualized, and Seen, Joyful	SEL strategies helped children express emotions; parents observed increased	SEL support through classroom play helped children navigate grief and trauma	SEL skills like empathy and conflict resolution were noticed at home and attributed to classroom interactions

		emotional regulation "(He) used to let outbursts ruin his whole day now it's just a moment." "Letting them feel emotions and face consequences was so important."	"You helped her navigate fear of the unknown, like with tornado drills." "They learned to compromise and share real life skills."	"She said, 'When my friend was sad, I asked if he was okay.'" "She learned how to say when she was sad and apply it more."
Supportive of Mental Health and Well-Being	Safe, Emotional Expression, Stress Relief, Responsive Teacher, Showing Love, Happiness/ Joyful	The classroom was described as therapeutic; parents credited the school environment with supporting children's healing "(He) will say, 'I'm mad, I need to go chill,' and he resets himself." "Giving them space to draw or play helped them re-engage and regulate."	Noted play and teacher support as key in helping children cope with complex emotional needs "You created an environment where even difficult students weren't left out." "(He) loved the calm down corner, he even made one at home."	Acknowledged that school supported emotional confidence and reduced stress around social learning "She's safe to feel the feelings she has that's a good part of your class." "They're not as ornery when they've had time to move and play."

Relationship Builder	Communication, Included, Parent Education, Responsive Teacher, Loving, Joyful	Strong parent-teacher collaboration; trust built through open communication "They respected you as a teacher and loved you as a friend." "You supported all three of them so differently, and they felt that."	Appreciated consistent updates, sensitivity, and inclusion in classroom culture during crises "You were really responsive when I had questions or concerns." "It was exciting to work together on classroom projects at home."	Felt welcomed and connected; valued open, supportive dialogue between home and school "They created a little family, they take care of each other." "We felt like partners in her learning journey."

Note. Quotes are representative excerpts from parent interviews used to illustrate thematic analysis collected in December 2024 -January 2025. Initial codes were developed through the coding of parent interviews and then used as a priori codes, which were continually validated through the reflexive practices (Ezzy, 2013).

* All names are pseudonyms.

This next stage involved returning to the full set of interview transcripts to revisit the underlined initial codes and verify that the developing themes: *teacher identity*, *playfulness*, *social-emotional learning (SEL)*, *mental health and well-being*, and *relationships* were consistently supported across the data. I examined the coherence of each theme internally and the clarity between themes externally, asking whether the data within each theme told a unified story and whether clear boundaries existed between each thematic category.

During this process, I also member-checked alongside my advisor how well the themes captured the depth of parent perspectives. I revisited the associated subthemes: *nurturing*, *playful*, *SEL-driven*, *supportive of mental health and well-being*, *relationship builder*, and *joyful,* to ensure they authentically illustrated how families described their experiences and aligned with the broader framework of each overarching theme. For example, I ensured that codes such as *individualized and seen*, *empowered*, and *responsive teacher* remained meaningfully situated within the subtheme *nurturing*, which itself contributed to the broader theme of *teacher identity*.

As part of this phase, I also engaged in member-checking with the parent participants. After initial themes and subthemes were identified, I shared a summary of the findings with each family to ensure that their voices were represented accurately and meaningfully. Participants were invited to provide in-person feedback on whether the emerging themes aligned with their intended messages in an informal meeting at a park, one family at a time. Their affirmations and reflections served to validate the thematic structure and added confidence that the analysis authentically captured the perspectives shared during the interviews. No significant changes were requested; they each felt I grasped solid themes from what they had shared with me, which further reinforced the credibility and resonance of the data interpretation.

This recursive review process ensured that the analysis remained firmly grounded in the participant data. I made slight adjustments to subtheme labels where necessary, combining or separating codes to reflect more accurately the voices of families. By the end of this phase, the subthemes had been solidified and demonstrated strong alignment with the experiences and emotions expressed by the families, offering an authentic representation of the interview data.

As I continued organizing the data, it became clear that these subthemes collectively fell into six overarching themes that would shape the remainder of my analysis: *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships,* and *joy.* I also cross-examined this coding alongside my advisor to ensure I was correct in my emerging themes and she agreed and supported me in the reflexive process of subthemes and overarching themes from the data sources.

To support this structure, I created a thematic codebook that defined each theme (included in the Appendix) and can be seen in Table 4. I used color-coded highlighters to visually sort the codes into these categories: peach for teacher identity (TI), purple for playfulness (P), blue for social-emotional learning (SEL), green for mental health and well-being (MH), and orange for relationships (R). This organization not only clarified the structure of the data but ensured that the thematic categories remained grounded in the participants' perspectives.

Table 4

Definitions of thematic codebook used in data analysis

Overarching Thematic code and Research Question(s) Addressed	Definition
Teacher identity RQ1	Codes related to personal beliefs, personal characteristics, professional roles, instructional practices, and cultural background (Chang, 2016).
Playfulness RQ2	Codes focused on implementing play in education, benefits observed, and challenges faced (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020).
Social-emotional learning (SEL) RQ1, RQ3	Codes that capture emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving as observed in the classroom (Jones et al., 2021; Bandura & Walters, 1977).
Mental health and well-being RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Codes related to the impact of play on stress relief, regulation, resilience, emotional expression, coping with trauma, and overall

	mental health (changes in mood and behavior) (Smith et al., 2019).
Relationships RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Codes regarding interactions between teachers, students, and families and how these relationships are nurtured through play or playful behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).
Joy RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	A dynamic, relational, and embodied experience that shapes how children learn, connect, and thrive (hooks, 2014).

Note. Joy was not originally a separate code but emerged during the analytic process of ongoing reflection. After noticing its presence across all thematic categories; *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being,* and *relationships*, it was added to reflect its extensive and interwoven role.

These six overarching themes: *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships,* and *joy* were identified through inductive analysis of the parent interviews are now being used as a priori codes to analyze additional data sources such as personal experiences and reflections, and parent communications. Using parent interviews to establish the initial codes in this study allowed thematic analysis to be grounded in the lived experiences, offering an authentic and relational entry point into understanding teacher identity (Chang, 2016). As an autoethnographic study, it was important to center the voices of those most impacted by my teaching, those who observed the effects of playfulness, social-emotional learning, and emotional support in real time. This transition ensures continuity in the analytic process and allows for consistent theoretical alignment and constant comparison across multiple perspectives and data sets within the study.

Analysis of Personal Journals and Reflections

Following this inductive phase, a priori coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied to all remaining data sources in a deductive manner, including personal experiences and reflections in journals and memory work, as viewed in Table 5 below. This was guided by codes derived from the parent interviews and the study's theoretical framework of Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994). I chose to only apply these codes to personal journals and reflections from the last eight years of journals since I have started teaching in public school as a kindergarten teacher. My reasoning for this is that when I began teaching at public school, after a significant amount of learning and training in early education, I shifted my teaching practices toward more play-based pedagogy. This also offered a concise snapshot of my more current teacher identity.

Table 5

Personal experiences (journals, memory work)

A Priori Theme/Code	Data Source	Memo
Teacher Identity (TI)	Today reminded me why I became a teacher in the first place. In the classroom, I'm not just their teacher; I'm their safe place. As we cleaned up, a student looked up at me and said, 'This was the best day ever!' Hearing that was the best part of my week (Personal journal, n.d.).	Affirms the personal belief of being a safe, nurturing figure beyond just an academic teacher.

Playfulness (Play)	Our dramatic play area turned into a full-blown "Disney" today for virtual Disney Day. The kids set up rides using chairs and scarves, and I was given the role of Mickey Mouse. As I pretended to greet 'guests,' one student exclaimed, 'This is just like the real place!' I found myself shedding the weight of the day as I got lost in the joy of their imaginations. Moments like this remind me that play isn't just for children; it's a chance for me to reconnect with my own inner child. Play isn't just an activity; it's how I build trust and relationships (Personal journal, n.d.).	Highlights how play nurtures joy, trust, and reconnection with both students in my identity.
Relationships (R)	During outdoor play, a group of kids invited me to be part of their game of 'Disney heroes and villains.' As we ran around pretending to battle, one child stopped and said, 'You're the best teacher because you play with us like you're a kid too.' I almost teared up right there. It reminded me of a moment from Peter Pan when Wendy says, 'You can't grow up completely, or you'll forget how to fly.' I think that's what play does for us it keeps us grounded while also lifting us up. These moments feel like core memories in the	Demonstrates how active participation in play strengthens teacher-student relationships.

	making, for both them and me (Personal journal, n.d.).	
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Using puppets to model conflict resolution today was eye-opening. When one puppet accidentally took the other's toy, the children suggested ways to make it right. One child said, 'You have to say sorry like you mean it, not just with your mouth.' It struck me how deeply they understand empathy when given the chance to express it through play (Personal journal, n.d.).	Shows how play supports development of empathy and emotional literacy among children.
Mental Health and Well-Being (MH)	"I like playing here because it makes me feel calm." It was a powerful reminder of the mental health benefits of play (Personal journal, n.d.).	Affirms the role of play in creating a calming, therapeutic classroom environment.
Teacher Identity (TI)	Today, I realized how much my identity as a teacher is different because I embraced play-based learning. I see myself as a co-explorer alongside the children. It's not about standing above them but kneeling at their level (Personal journal, n.d.).	Emphasizes a shift toward a relational, child-centered teaching philosophy.
Playfulness (Play)	In a moment of spontaneity, we turned a math lesson into a game of shopkeeper. The children quickly learned to make change using play money, but what struck me most	Demonstrates how my playful approaches enhance engagement and real-world learning connections.

	was their engagement (Personal journal, n.d.).	
Mental Health and Well-Being (MH)	A rough morning turned into a moment of calm during our sensory play session. As we played with kinetic sand, one child confided, 'I feel safe when we play here' (Personal journal, n.d.).	Illustrates the role of play in emotional safety and classroom belonging.
Playfulness (Play)	Today, I watched as the kids turned a simple art project into an elaborate storytelling session. One student said, 'This is a map to the treasure, like in Peter Pan!' I realized that letting go of my own agenda allowed them to take the lead in their learning (Personal journal, n.d.).	Highlights the importance of child-led exploration in fostering creativity.
Relationships (R)	After school today, a parent told me how much their child talks about our playtime at home. They said, 'You've brought out a side of them we hadn't seen before, more confident, more creative' (Personal journal, n.d.).	Shows that strong teacher-student bonds influence children's growth and development outside school as well.
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Today, we played a board game where kids had to take turns and manage their frustration when things didn't go their way. One child said, 'It's okay,	Demonstrates the development of patience and emotional regulation through play.

	I'll get another turn' (Personal journal, n.d.).	
Mental Health and Well-Being (MH)	After a stressful meeting, I joined the kids for a music-and-movement session. Their carefree dancing reminded me to let go and enjoy the moment. Sometimes, I need the benefits of play too (Memory work, n.d.).	Play supports both student and teacher mental health and stress relief.
Teacher Identity (TI)	During a parent-teacher conference, one parent shared how much their child talks about our playtime. They said, 'You're the only teacher who's ever really gotten him' (Memory work, n.d.).	Validates my belief in relationship-driven and play-based teaching.
Relationships (R)	During free play, I joined a group of students building a racetrack for their toy cars. One student hesitated to let me play, saying, 'You're the teacher; you don't play with us.' I smiled and said, 'Teachers can have fun too!' By the end, one of them said, 'You made it more fun, Ms. Christie!' (Personal journal, n.d.).	Emphasizes how shared play strengthens relational trust.
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Reflecting on the day, I realized I felt drained and less patient. I lost my patience more than I should have. Tomorrow, I need to apologize to them and try harder to do better. It's a reminder to care for my own mental health, just as I prioritize the	Highlights my self-reflection on emotional regulation and modeling growth for students.

children's well-being (Memory work, n.d.).

Note. The above quotes and reflections come from personal journals, memory work, and reflections written by the researcher over the past eight years while teaching kindergarten. Quotes in this table are drawn from reflective journals written by the researcher and from anonymous student journals submitted during classroom activities (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016). Student names are withheld to protect confidentiality in compliance with IRB protocols.

Journals. As I analyzed my personal journals, I engaged in a reflective review process guided by the five overarching a priori themes identified from the parent interviews: *Teacher Identity, Playfulness, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Mental Health and Well-Being*, and *Relationships*. As I read each entry, I determined which theme, or combination of themes, naturally aligned with and systematically grouped the journal excerpts into their corresponding categories.

This intentional thematic organization allowed me to analyze personal reflections with depth and clarity, while also remaining grounded in the voices of families whose insights originally shaped the thematic structure. By organizing entries under the relevant themes, I could examine patterns and contexts, noting how my teaching philosophies, emotional responses, and professional growth were interwoven with each of the five conceptual areas.

Organizing reflections by theme rather than isolating them through line-by-line coding offers a flexible and authentic way to analyze personal experiences while maintaining coherence with the participant-informed structure of the study. This method also supported the constant comparative process by allowing thematic alignment across multiple data sources and promoting recursive, reflexive interpretation throughout the analysis.

Analyzing my personal journal reflections through the lenses of Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994) revealed how my day-to-day teaching practices were deeply grounded in developmental theory. As I sorted journaled experiences into the five a priori themes: *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being,* and *relationships*, I found that my reflections consistently aligned with the values and outcomes families had described in their interviews. Entries that detailed child-led exploration, immersive learning centers, and play invitations reflected core tenets of Play Theory, affirming the importance of joyful, imaginative learning. Moments of modeling emotional regulation, offering verbal coaching, or supporting children in navigating social challenges resonated with Bandura's framework, illustrating how my own behaviors were observed and internalized by students. Additionally, entries that captured home-school connections, trauma-informed responses, or culturally responsive teaching demonstrated how my role was situated within and influenced by broader environmental systems, supporting Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective. Through this interpretive process, I discovered that the qualities families appreciated most, nurturing, empowering, and joyful teaching, were not only evident in their shared perspectives but were deeply embedded in my personal narratives, confirming that my teacher identity functions as a bridge between developmental theory and lived classroom practice.

Memory Work. My memory work, composed of deeply personal reflections and recollections of formative teaching experiences, was analyzed by identifying vivid moments aligned with the five a priori themes: *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships.* These memory narratives were not coded line-by-line but were instead holistically interpreted to preserve their emotional and narrative

integrity, a practice common in autoethnographic research (Chang, 2016). As I revisited memories, ranging from early childhood play to pivotal teaching moments, I organized each memory under its corresponding theme. For example, memories of imaginative role-play in my childhood or co-constructed play scenarios in the classroom were aligned with Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020), highlighting how my foundational experiences shaped my belief in the power of playful learning. Recollections of moments when students mirrored my emotional regulation strategies or imitated collaborative behaviors were interpreted through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Situations where student behavior reflected family dynamics, community context, or systemic barriers were examined through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994), offering insight into how broader environmental systems impact the classroom. Through this interpretive process, I discovered that my memory work not only reinforced the emerging themes from the parent interviews but also revealed how my evolving teacher identity has been shaped by personal history and situated within developmental theory. These reflective recollections added narrative depth and personal meaning to the study, affirming that my pedagogical decisions are often rooted in lived experiences of connection, resilience, and play.

Analysis of Parent Communications

After analyzing my personal reflections and classroom experiences, I turned to parent communications to further explore how families made sense of their children's development within my classroom practices. These communications, shared through past surveys, which can be found in the appendix, emails, and social media platforms, offered valuable insight into how parents perceived the learning environment, my practices, and overall impact of my teaching. While personal reflections allowed me to examine my internal processes and values, parent

communications revealed how those practices were interpreted, appreciated, and remembered by families. This next phase of analysis provided a broader picture of how the themes developed in earlier stages were supported in the voices of families, as viewed in Table 6 below. The insights gained from these communications closely aligned with and reinforced the themes that emerged from the parent interviews, further supporting the thematic integrity of the study. These communications were listed in order they were received, rather than grouped by a priori themes, allowing them to authentically be reflected in the memos I created.

Table 6

Parent communications (surveys, emails, social media)

A Priori Theme	Data Source	Memo
Teacher Identity	"The environment that you create, with the way you do things, allows you to engage everyone, while still meeting everyone's needs." (Parent Email, personal communication, n.d.).	Parent recognizes the teacher's professional identity of inclusiveness and differentiated support.
Playfulness	"Watching my child play and learn this way is magical. I never had experiences like this in school, and I'm so grateful she gets to have them now." (Parent Survey, personal communication, n.d.).	Playfulness, created a sense of wonder and engagement that parents valued, contrasting with traditional experiences.
Playfulness	"I love seeing my daughter come home excited about what she did today. She talks about the games, the friends, and how much fun she had while learning. It makes me wish I had gone to school in a classroom like this." (Student Seesaw Journal, personal communication, n.d.).	Play fosters joy and enthusiasm for learning, which parents see translating into positive attitudes at home.
Social-Emotional Learning	"When you combine the play with the act of learning. It sets in for them in a whole lot more… every day was a playful exchange of knowledge." (Parent Email, personal communication, n.d.).	Parents recognize how play supports both academic and social-emotional integration.

Mental Health and Well-Being	"Thank you for helping him." Attached was an image of a corner of his mother's bedroom where he had replicated our Safe Place center. (Student Seesaw Journal, personal communication, n.d.).	Play-based Safe Place center provided a model for emotional regulation that extended into home life, helping with grief.
Social-Emotional Learning	"Set him up to identify if something is wrong in the first place, if there is an issue to ask for help." (Parent Survey, personal communication, n.d.).	Parents value that the classroom environment fostered emotional awareness and help-seeking behavior.
Teacher Identity	"You are like a teacher out of a fairy tale. Every day my daughter comes home talking about something magical she learned in your class. I wish I had experienced school this way." (Parent Email, personal communication, n.d.).	Parent recognizes the teacher's unique teaching identity characterized by creativity, joy, and magic.
Relationships	"My son and his best friend met in your class, and now in fifth grade, they still make up games together just like they did in kindergarten. Their friendship started with play, and it's still growing today." (Parent Facebook Message, personal communication, n.d.).	Play-based environments nurture lasting peer relationships beyond the classroom experience.
Playfulness	"My son never sees his homework as something he has to do, it's something he wants to do because it's always fun and interactive." (Parent Survey, personal communication, n.d.).	Play-based approaches motivate intrinsic engagement with academic tasks, reframing learning as enjoyable.

Surveys. Parent survey responses were analyzed using a priori thematic codes drawn from the parent interview findings: *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being*, and *relationships*. Open-ended response sections were grouped into these categories and interpreted using the study's theoretical frameworks. For example, when parents wrote about their children learning to manage big emotions or show empathy, these responses were analyzed through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Reflections on feeling seen and supported by the teacher were viewed through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994), emphasizing the importance of teacher-family interactions within the

microsystem. Through the surveys, there was a consistent pattern of trust and appreciation for the practices I shared. Parents viewed the classroom as a nurturing space that prioritized their child's emotional development and individualized learning. Several families explicitly credited the play-based environment and responsive teaching with helping their children flourish cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

To further explore these themes, the Likert-scale survey data was analyzed from the same twenty-two families who participated in the comments sections used for the qualitative data collected in these surveys. Parents rated key items on a 3-point scale (1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree). For this study, I focused only on those items that the data connected to with the a priori coding, the core constructs of the research, and supported the emerging qualitative themes. The item, *Provides an environment that promotes health,* received a mean score of $M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.21$, with twenty-one parents selecting "3" and one selecting "2." The item, *Provides activities, materials, and schedules that promote my child's development and education,* had a slightly lower mean of $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.39$, with eighteen "3" responses and four "2" responses. The statement, *Nurtures my child, helping her/him build a positive self-identity and respect for every child's cultural backgrounds,* yielded $M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.21$, with twenty-one "3" responses and one "2" response. Finally, the item, *Establishes positive, responsive, and cooperative relationships with me and the members of our family,* received a mean of $M = 2.86$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.35$, comprising nineteen "3" responses and three "2" responses. While I don't include in this study the additional scale sections, they reflect ratings close to those included, and are generally positive. These ratings validate the qualitative findings, reinforcing the perception that the classroom was a joyful, safe, and relationally rich environment rooted in developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practices.

Emails. I reviewed email correspondence that provided detailed, authentic accounts of parent experiences and allowed for deeper contextual insight. These emails were read closely, sorted by the five a priori themes, and examined for alignment with the theoretical frameworks. Often, these emails were written in response to specific classroom events or moments of connection. While these emails did not directly discuss playfulness itself, they frequently referenced the magic, fairy-tale-like experiences, and the emotional environment I created for their children. Parents often described the classroom as a place where their children felt deeply loved, supported, safe, and seen.

Many emails also included specific examples of how children were transferring social and emotional learning skills into their home lives, such as using emotion words, practicing self-regulation, or demonstrating empathy toward siblings and peers. These moments were interpreted through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), which helped to understand how modeled behaviors and supportive interactions in the classroom were internalized by children.

Parents also shared appreciation for the emotional availability and responsive care their children received, reinforcing the thematic focus on *teacher identity*, *relationships*, and *mental health and well-being*. In these communications, play was not explicitly named, but the outcomes associated with high-quality, play-based environments such as *emotional confidence, secure attachment,* and *joy* were clearly valued and noticed. These reflections highlighted how my identity as a nurturing, responsive educator was being felt and affirmed by families in meaningful, lasting ways.

Social Media. The continued use of the a priori theme codes with comments from social media platforms used by the school and classroom, such as *Facebook*, and *Seesaw*, provided

valuable insight into how families experienced and interpreted my teaching practices. Posts, comments, private messages, and responses to classroom updates frequently highlighted the *joy*, *magic*, and *emotional connection* children felt in the classroom. Parents often described their child's experience as *fairy tale-like*, full of *love*, *support*, and *excitement* for learning. While these reflections did not always explicitly reference play, the language used, describing *laughter, imagination, creativity, and deep emotional bonds*, mirrored the outcomes of playfulness, supported by my practices.

Using Seesaw, families responded to documentation of learning, student work, and collaborative learning moments with enthusiasm. They noted how their children talked about and connected these experiences at home and they often identified emotional or social growth, such as learning to compromise, showing empathy, or expressing pride in their accomplishments. These reactions reflected a recognition of social-emotional development, even if not labeled as such, and they affirmed the value of the classroom culture built on relationships, play, and trust.

Joy Through All Themes

While *joy* was not one of the original five overarching themes identified through the parent interviews, it quickly became clear that joy was present in every area of the data after initially being found as a subtheme in parent interviews. Examples of this can be seen in Table 7. It showed up in the way parents described their children's excitement to come to school, how they talked about the *magic* or *fairy-tale* feeling of our classroom, and in the small moments I captured in my journals; those silly jokes, spontaneous dance parties, or playful lessons where everyone was laughing and learning together. Even in memory work, *joy* often surfaced as a grounding force that helped me stay connected to my purpose as a teacher, especially during

challenging times. Upon reflection and discussion with my research advisor, we decided to move *joy* into the sixth overarching theme.

Table 7

Finding joy across all data and themes

Data Source	Excerpt	Interpretation/Insight
Parent Interview	"Every day was a playful exchange of knowledge. My kids would come home talking about how much fun they had while learning" (Parent communication, December 2024.).	Joyful learning experiences were highly valued by families and contributed to student engagement.
Parent Communication	"You've brought out a side of them we hadn't seen before, more confident, more creative. They're happy at school again." (Parent communication, n.d.).	Joy was linked to confidence and creativity, reinforcing the role of play in supporting mental well-being.
Personal Journal	"Watching the kids lose themselves in play reminded me to let go of the need for control and just be present… These moments feel like core memories" (Personal journal, n.d.).	Joy was not just observed in children; it became a reflective source of meaning and purpose for the teacher.
Memory Work	"We were able to laugh, imagine, and immerse ourselves in a world of shared wonder... I want my students to feel that same joy in our classroom" (Memory work, n.d.).	Childhood memories of joyful play deeply inform the teacher's motivation to recreate those feelings.

Across all the data, whether it was through stories of play, notes about emotional growth, or reflections on relationships, joy was a constant. It did not just accompany the themes of playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, or relationships; it amplified each of them. Joy created the emotional safety that made learning stick. It helped

children feel seen, safe, and celebrated, reminding me repeatedly why I do this work. Joy was the thread that tied everything together, and it remains essential.

Findings and Autoethnographic Reflection

The narrative findings that follow build upon this thematic analysis by illustrating how these six interconnected themes of *teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships,* and *joy* intersect within my classroom and personal experiences. Through symbolic autoethnography, I move beyond coding to share stories, reflections, and parent voices that reveal deeper insight on how the themes emerged. These narratives serve not only as data, but as meaning-making cultivated through everyday moments. As I explore each theme, I draw upon theoretical frameworks to contextualize these lived experiences, demonstrating how teacher identity intersects with play-based learning, which functions not only as a pedagogical method but as a method shaping children's development holistically.

Teacher Identity

Understanding the significance of play in my approaches from the lens of my teacher identity begins with reflecting on my own experiences that have shaped my teaching philosophy and pedagogical approach. This section sets the stage for my findings by exploring my formative memories of play and learning and providing insight into how these early experiences have influenced my professional practice and teacher identity, which intersects with the other themes which emerged from the data I collected. Autoethnography allows me to use personal narratives to make sense of broader cultural and educational phenomena, positioning my experiences as both data and analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). By examining my interactions with play, both as a child and as an educator, I highlight the foundational role of play in cognitive, social, and

emotional development (Ginsburg, 2021). Additionally, my own teacher identity plays a crucial role in how I implement playfulness and social-emotional development in the classroom, as my personal history directly informs my relationships with students and families (Rogers, 2021). Through these reflections, I offer a lens for understanding how play fosters holistic child development and why it remains a central component of my teaching practice.

My Childhood Experiences With Play. The recurring transformations I have witnessed in my classroom reaffirm what I have long believed; play is not just an instructional tool or strategy; it is the foundation for how children learn, regulate emotions, and build relationships (Whitebread, 2019). The shifts I see in my students, such as, greater emotional regulation, increased engagement, and positive peer connections highlight the critical role of play and social-emotional learning in childhood development (Jones et al., 2019). Research shows that children who develop strong social-emotional skills are better equipped to navigate challenges, build resilience, and achieve long-term success in both academic and social settings (Masten, 2021). Skills such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, collaboration, and self-advocacy are essential not only for immediate classroom success but also for shaping future relationships, mental health, and career readiness (CASEL, 2022). My decision to integrate play-based learning, trauma-informed practices, and social-emotional learning was not just informed by research; it was deeply personal. As I reflect on my students' need for safety, connection, and joyful learning, I see parallels to my own childhood experiences navigating instability, adversity, and the search for belonging (Masten, 2021). The situations and placement of these students could have easily been where I ended up as a child. Growing up, I faced challenges that made school both a refuge and a battleground, a place where teachers' actions either reinforced my struggles or offered the lifeline I desperately needed. It was through play, imagination, and

strong relationships that I found resilience and hope. These early experiences shaped not only who I am as an educator, but also the research questions guiding this study, as I explore the intersections of teacher identity, play-based learning, and social-emotional well-being in early childhood education. To fully understand my commitment to this work, it is essential to first explore my own childhood and how my early experiences with play and adversity shaped my perspective as both a student and a teacher.

My Memories of Play. My earliest memories of play are woven into the fabric of survival. Growing up in a household filled with instability, trauma, and uncertainty, I found refuge not in reality but in the world of imagination and play. When my world around me was unraveling, I was Cinderella, waiting for my moment of transformation, for my fairy godmother to arrive and rescue me from a life that often felt unbearable. I was also Belle, escaping through books into new worlds, Ariel longing for something beyond my circumstances, and Peter Pan, refusing to let go of the childhood innocence that hardship threatened to steal away. Unlike the glass slipper that found its rightful foot in a perfect fairy-tale ending, play was my real-life escape. Play allowed me to dissociate from the chaos around me, creating joy in moments where joy should not have existed (Singer & Singer, 2009). It became my coping mechanism, my way of reclaiming control in a world where I had none. These Disney characters embodied resilience, curiosity, and wonder, all the qualities I clung to. This belief in the power of play, of imagination as a force for survival and hope, was planted in my childhood and has since grown into the foundation of my advocacy for playfulness (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

Not all childhood stories are filled with magic. If play shaped my ability to find joy, my experiences in school solidified my belief in the need for kindness, equity, and unwavering support for all children, regardless of their background. One memory remains an anchor in my

teaching philosophy. I was in third grade, struggling with absenteeism since I was forced to count on my parents to get me to school. They were often hungover, or still too inebriated to get me to school. It was another morning of arriving late, another reminder that my family circumstances set me apart from my peers. My teacher, an authority figure whose words should have built me up, instead cemented a wound that would take years to unlearn. “You’re never going to amount to much if you don’t come to school,” she said, her voice filled with judgment, even though I was still one of the top-performing students. I later overheard her at recess telling another teacher, “She will just be white trash, just like her parents.”

I did not have the words then to articulate the impact of those statements, but I felt their weight. I carried them. They settled into my identity, fueling both self-doubt and an unrelenting determination. However, rather than let those words define me, I chose to turn them into fuel. School became the one thing I could control once I was there, the one place where my efforts translated into tangible results. I committed myself to excelling academically, proving to myself that my worth was not dictated by my circumstances. Each lesson learned, each success earned, was an act of defiance against those who doubted me. Resilience became my strongest asset, and the foundation upon which I built my future (Masten, 2001). My ability to navigate adversity and my drive to create emotionally supportive spaces for children became core themes of my educational approach because of this one defining moment. It planted the seed for me to eventually choose to become the adult that I needed when I was a student in the classroom. I became committed to proving that a child’s worth is not dictated by their upbringing but by their perseverance, resilience, dreams, and the opportunities they are given. This belief now shapes the way I teach, ensuring that every child in my classroom knows that their potential is limitless and that they are seen, valued, and capable of greatness.

My Cultural and Family Influences on Play. The transformative power of these Disney stories became even more real during the one family vacation we ever took. My grandmother, fearing that her cancer would soon take her from us, paid for our entire family to go to Disney World. It was one of the few happy family memories I have and remains one of the best experiences of my childhood. Later in life, I realized that the magic I experienced during that trip was not just about the rides or the characters, but about the way the play we experienced there brought my entire family together. Across generations, we were able to laugh, imagine, and immerse ourselves in a world of shared wonder and play, something that, as an adult I have worked on replicating for my daughter in our family. The ability of play to unite people of all ages and foster deep emotional connections solidified my belief in its power. The feelings of happiness, belonging, and imagination that Disney fostered in me during that trip are the same emotions I strive to create in my classroom. Every child I work with deserves to feel that same kind of joy, to know that no matter what challenges they face, they have a place where they can dream, create, and be their fullest selves.

I reflect on when I was even younger, and I can remember using play to process my world, navigate uncertainty, and regain a sense of control. Growing up in an environment marked by instability, I often engaged in interpretive reproduction, a process in which children take elements of their real-world experiences and reshape them through play to create meaning (Corsaro, 2005). Whether I was constructing forts from blankets to establish a safe space, turning cardboard boxes into adventure vehicles that transported me away from reality, or reenacting social scenarios with my Barbies and stuffed animals, I was not just playing; I was making sense of the emotions and challenges I faced. School became both a refuge and a battleground, and while academic learning was often disrupted by frequent transitions and external stressors, play

remained consistent and could stay the same no matter wherever we moved. Play was a self-directed space where I could explore emotions, develop social scripts, and experiment with problem-solving. More importantly, it was a way for me to generate a sense of hope for changes in my future by exploring what possible outcomes I could have. Research supports that children facing adversity often use play to reinterpret and reconstruct their experiences, fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and social competency (Masten, 2021; Russ & Dillon, 2021). Now, as an educator, I see the same patterns emerge in my students. I have watched children act out social conflicts through dramatic play, giving dolls or puppets the words they struggle to say in real life. I have observed children who have experienced food insecurity hoard pretend food in the play kitchen, mirroring real-life fears they may not yet have the language to express. I have seen children recreate disciplinary moments with their peers, shifting roles between teacher and student as they work through emotions tied to authority and structure. Each of these moments is a child's way of processing their world through interpretive reproduction, reshaping their experiences into something they can control and understand (Corsaro, 2005). Recognizing these patterns allows me to intentionally support and guide their play, validating their experiences while introducing new ways to navigate them. My unique perspective through my experiences places me in a position to empathize and relate to students in ways many other teachers cannot do. Instead of simply observing, I engage, offering language to help them name emotions, scaffolding conflict resolution strategies, and ensuring they have a safe space to explore their feelings in developmentally appropriate ways (Jones et al., 2019). I connect to them by sharing my own stories from when I was their age.

Looking back, I see how essential play was in fostering my resilience, creativity, and adaptability, and I am now committed to ensuring that every child has the same opportunity to

process, heal, and grow through play. My own experiences not only shaped my belief in the power of playfulness but also reinforced the importance of creating a classroom environment where children can safely reconstruct their realities, build relationships, and develop the social-emotional skills they need to thrive. By integrating intentional playfulness, I strive to support my students in the same way that play once supported me.

My Journey Into Early Education. My experiences with play as a child were not just memories; they were the foundation of my teaching philosophy and identity. They shaped how I approach learning, how I build relationships with students, and ultimately, how I came to believe in the transformative power of play and social-emotional development in early childhood education.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory in My Classroom. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (2018) highlights the role of observational learning and modeling in shaping behaviors, beliefs, and decision-making, particularly within educational environments. According to Bandura (2018), individuals learn not only through direct experiences but also by observing and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional expressions of others. In the context of teaching, this theory underscores how teacher identity is continuously shaped by the experiences, role models, and instructional practices that educators observe throughout their careers (Bandura, 2018).

Observational learning has played a significant role in shaping my own teacher identity and instructional decisions. From my early experiences as a teaching assistant to my role as a lead teacher, I have absorbed and reflected on the practices of educators around me, incorporating what I have seen into my own teaching philosophy. Watching experienced educators navigate student interactions, implement play-based learning, and respond to

classroom challenges has provided me with a foundation for understanding how play, social-emotional learning, and relationship-building should be integrated into an early childhood classroom (Weisberg et al., 2020).

Modeling is also a key component of how I interact with students and structure my classroom environment. As Bandura (2018) emphasizes, children learn behaviors, values, and social skills by watching and imitating the adults around them. In a play-based learning environment, this means that my actions, tone, and engagement in play directly influence how students approach learning, cooperation, and problem-solving. I intentionally model behaviors such as curiosity, resilience, and empathy, demonstrating how to ask questions, explore new ideas, and navigate social interactions in positive ways. For example, during a group activity, if a conflict arises between students over sharing materials, I model active listening and problem-solving, saying something like, “I see that you both want the same toy. Let's think of a way to take turns or use it together.” Through this approach, I am not only guiding students toward solutions but also teaching them how to regulate emotions and engage in collaborative play (Denham et al., 2019).

Beyond student interactions, observational learning, and modeling shapes my instructional decisions. By reflecting on the practices of educators I admire and the impact of play-based learning in my own classroom, I continue to refine and adapt my approach. Bandura (2018) emphasizes that self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s belief in their ability to influence outcomes, develops through repeated exposure to successful models. The more I observe the positive impact of playfulness on student engagement, emotional regulation, and peer relationships, the more confident I become in advocating for its place in early childhood education.

Additionally, modeling extends to my relationships with families and colleagues. Just as students learn through observation, parents and fellow educators also take cues from how I structure play-based learning, manage classroom dynamics, and communicate the value of play and playfulness. By sharing my teaching philosophy, classroom documentation, and play-based approaches, I aim to influence broader educational perspectives, demonstrating that play is not just an activity, but a research-supported, developmentally appropriate approach to early learning (Bailey et al., 2019). Bandura's Social Learning Theory (2018) highlights how observational learning and modeling play a critical role in shaping teacher identity and instructional decisions. My teaching philosophy has been deeply influenced by the practices of experienced educators, classroom observations, and the direct impact of playfulness on student development. The way I model curiosity, resilience, playfulness, and problem-solving in the classroom directly influences how students develop social-emotional skills and approach learning. Through intentional modeling, reflection, and adaptation, I continue to refine my identity as an educator, ensuring that play, relationships, and social-emotional learning remain at the core of my teaching practices.

My Own Playfulness

Through reflexive journaling, I recognize that my playful teaching identity shapes the way I facilitate play to foster social and emotional development, mental health and well-being, and strong relationships, even when it is difficult and requires more thought than if I simply followed the boxed curriculum. As recorded in my personal journal:

> Today was one of those days where I felt drained. Play-based learning requires so much more than setting up activities. It's being present, observing, guiding, and jumping in when needed. During free play, my favorite part of our day in kindergarten, I spent time

> helping two students resolve a conflict in the block center, joining a scene to encourage inclusion, and answering a hundred 'what if' questions at the sensory table. By the end of the day, I was exhausted but also deeply fulfilled. Watching a shy kid step into a leadership role during a game or seeing two kids work out their differences reminded me why I do this work. The rewards are worth the effort, even on the hardest days, I know this can be done in public schools, these kids deserve it (Personal Journal, 2019).

One way my playful teacher identity emerges in practice is using Disney and the ideas it upholds. This resonates with young children's interests and helps me build connections. Such as using short clips from Disney films to support academic learning. For example, I often use *Forky Asks a Question,* a series of short, humorous clips featuring the character from *Toy Story 4*, to introduce or reinforce content-related questions. These brief episodes offer accessible entry points for exploring abstract concepts, such as "What is a friend?" or "What is money?" and enable students to engage in meaningful dialogue while connecting academic ideas to engaging narratives. I have also used clips from the training montages in *Mulan* to highlight the use of verbs, as well as descriptive scenes from *Moana* to explore adjectives and setting. These familiar and joyful experiences help build engagement, understanding, and a sense of connection within the classroom. At the same time, I am aware that Disney reflects my cultural lens and upbringing and may not accurately represent the experiences or values of all children and families. As a reflective educator, I strive to strike a balance between my sources of joy and a commitment to cultural responsiveness. I encourage other educators to identify diverse, inclusive sources of imagination and inquiry that align with their own teacher identity, students' backgrounds, and lived experiences, ensuring that all feel seen, valued, and empowered to learn through play.

Play Theory. Play theories offer diverse perspectives on how play influences children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Much of my playful teacher identity centers around ideas from Smith and Pellegrini's (2020) play theory and Brown's (2020) play personalities because they offer contemporary, research-based classification of play types: including locomotor play, object play, social play, pretend play, language play, and games with rules, which align with my focus on play-based learning, social-emotional development, and mental health. Their frameworks provide a nuanced analysis of how different forms of play contribute to children's holistic development, particularly within early childhood education settings. By utilizing Smith and Pellegrini's typology, I can more effectively examine how different types of play foster relationships, teacher identity, social-emotional development, and supports mental health and well-being, and joy, all of which are critical components of my research on teacher identity and its role in shaping playfulness.

My Play Personalities. According to Brown's (2020) play theory, play personalities influence how people engage with play throughout their lives. I strongly identify with the Joker and the Explorer, two play personalities that shape how I create joyful, engaging learning experiences in my classroom. As the Joker, I bring humor and lightheartedness into learning, using playful exaggeration, silly voices, and spontaneous role-playing to create an atmosphere of fun. Whether it's pretending to be a confused customer in the dramatic play center, acting like I "forgot how to count" during math, or using playful misdirection to encourage critical thinking, I use humor to keep students engaged, lower stress, and make learning feel like an adventure (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Additionally, as an Explorer, I embrace curiosity and discovery in my teaching, encouraging my students to ask big questions, experiment, and take learning beyond the

classroom walls. This means incorporating nature-based exploration, hands-on investigations, and student-led inquiry projects. When my students became fascinated by insects, we transformed the classroom into a "bug lab" complete with bug observation stations, life cycle explorations, and a "build your own insect" creative play activity. This kind of exploratory play allows children to take ownership of their learning while developing critical thinking and scientific reasoning skills (Annet, 2024). In my classroom, I intentionally incorporate multiple types of play to ensure that children receive well-rounded, meaningful learning experiences that foster autonomy, collaboration, and emotional well-being while also meeting the needs of the various play personalities within my classroom.

Types of Play Through the Lens of Teacher Identity. Complementing the reflection of Brown's (2020) framework of play personalities in my identity, I also integrate various types of play that align with my students' motivations and interests.

Guided by the belief that every child engages with the world in unique ways, I structure my classroom environment and play experiences to support their diverse needs and backgrounds to provide meaningful learning, social and emotional growth, and build positive relationships through aspects of my teacher identity. In the sections below, I will explore how I support each type of play through my playful teacher personality.

Locomotor Play. Physical play is essential for locomotor development, coordination, and emotional regulation (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Research has shown that movement-based play also reduces stress and improves attention span, particularly for children who struggle with self-regulation (Bethell et al., 2019). I incorporate structured and unstructured movement-based play into my classroom by creating obstacle courses, dance breaks, and dramatic role-play scenarios that encourage whole-body engagement. One of my favorite ways to integrate movement play is

through pretend adventures, such as turning the classroom into an imaginary jungle where students must ‘leap over rivers,’ ‘swing from vines,’ and ‘crawl through tunnels.’ These activities enhance gross motor skills while allowing children to use their imaginations freely.

My Use of Exploratory and Object Play. Exploratory play, sometimes called object play, occurs when children interact with materials, test cause-and-effect relationships, and engage in hands-on learning (Ginsburg, 2021). This type of play is essential for building curiosity, problem-solving skills, and fine motor development (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). In my classroom, I support exploratory play by providing STEM-based loose parts, such as ramps, magnets, blocks, and sensory bins. For example, I might challenge students to build a bridge using different materials, prompting them to test their ideas and refine their approach. Through this process, they learn spatial awareness, engineering concepts, and collaborative problem-solving, all within a play-based framework (Bailey et al., 2019).

My Use of Social Play and Dramatic Play. Dramatic play is one of the most powerful tools for developing social skills, empathy, and emotional regulation (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). When children engage in role-playing activities, they practice cooperation, perspective-taking, and communication, all of which are critical for building relationships (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). I intentionally create dramatic play centers that rotate themes based on student interests and curriculum connections. For example, I have transformed my classroom into a bakery, a weather station, the North Pole, a veterinarian’s office, an airport, and even an entire Disney theme park experience!

One of my most memorable experiences with dramatic play involved a student, Layla, who was extremely shy and hesitant to speak in group settings; one could almost describe her as selective mute. However, when we set up a ‘restaurant’ dramatic play center, she eagerly took on

the role of the ‘head chef,’ organizing the kitchen, taking pretend orders, and interacting with her classmates. Through this play, she built confidence, practiced leadership, and strengthened her verbal communication skills, which eventually translated into her willingness to participate in other classroom discussions. This experience reinforced what play theory suggests that dramatic play is not just an enjoyable activity, but a vital component of emotional and social development (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

My Use of Language Play. Language play is a crucial component of early childhood education, supporting literacy development, verbal communication, and creative expression in a way that feels natural and engaging for young learners (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Brown (2020) describes language play as the joyful manipulation of words, sounds, and storytelling, allowing children to experiment with language in ways that develop fluency, comprehension, and confidence. Whether through rhymes, word games, dramatic storytelling, or playful conversations, language play fosters phonemic awareness, vocabulary growth, and a deeper understanding of how language works (Weisberg et al., 2020). In my classroom, I intentionally integrate language-rich play opportunities to help students develop oral language skills, listening comprehension, and a love for literacy.

One of the ways I incorporate language play is through storytelling and pretend play. I frequently use silly voices, exaggerated expressions, and playful questioning to make storytelling more engaging. For example, when reading aloud, I often ‘accidentally’ mix up words to encourage students to correct me, ‘Wait, did I just say the Three Little Chickens instead of the Three Little Pigs? That can’t be right! I am getting older and confused!’ which sparks laughter and encourages active listening and language comprehension. Research that supports engaging

children in interactive storytelling strengthens their narrative skills, enhances recall, and fosters creativity in language use (Ginsburg, 2021).

Another way I encourage language play is through rhyming games, tongue twisters, and nonsense word exploration. During morning meetings, we play phonemic awareness games like 'Rhyme Time,' where I give a word and students come up with rhyming counterparts, sometimes real and sometimes made-up words. If I say 'hat,' students might respond with 'cat, bat, splat, glat!', at which point we discuss whether 'glat' is a real word or a 'silly word.' I also end the activity by jokingly and lovingly calling them 'smartie farties'. These activities reinforce phonological awareness, sound manipulation, and confidence in experimenting with language (Bailey et al., 2019).

My Use of Games with Rules. Games with rules are an essential component of play theory and early childhood development, providing children with opportunities to develop cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, cooperation, and social-emotional skills (Pellegrini, 2011). Unlike free play, where children create their own structure, games with rules introduce boundaries, turn-taking, and strategy, helping young learners build impulse control, patience, and an understanding of fairness (Bailey et al., 2019). These games also support executive functioning, as children must remember and follow multi-step instructions, adapt to changing circumstances, and manage their emotions when winning or losing (Denham et al., 2019).

In my classroom, I intentionally incorporate games with rules to teach self-regulation, collaboration, and problem-solving in a structured yet playful way. One of the most effective games for practicing patience and turn-taking is 'Musical Freeze,' where students dance freely but must stop and freeze when the music stops. At the beginning of the year, many children struggle with the concept of pausing their movement on command, but as we play regularly, they

learn to control their bodies and follow auditory cues, building their ability to self-regulate (Ginsburg, 2021).

I also use board games and card games to reinforce literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving while helping students learn to follow sequential instructions and take turns. Games like 'Roll & Cover' (a number recognition game) provide structured ways for children to practice academic skills in a fun and interactive setting. Many of my students come into kindergarten struggling with waiting for their turn or handling the emotions of losing, but through repeated exposure to these games, they begin to understand that playing is about the experience, not just the outcome (Weisberg et al., 2020). One of the most impactful moments I have seen from games with rules involved a student, Henry, who struggled with emotional regulation and often reacted strongly to losing. In the first few weeks of school, he would throw game pieces, refuse to continue, or yell when he did not win. Rather than removing games altogether, I incorporated structured social-emotional lessons around playing fairly, taking deep breaths when feeling upset, and celebrating peers' successes. Over time, I watched as Henry went from throwing a tantrum over losing to smiling and saying, 'That was fun! Let's play again.' This shift showed me how structured games with rules are not just about fun; they help children build resilience, patience, and sportsmanship (Denham et al., 2019).

***My Use of* Structured Play vs. Free Play.** Both structured and free play are essential components of early childhood education, each serving a unique role in supporting cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (Pellegrini, 2011). Structured play is adult-guided with specific objectives, rules, or learning outcomes, while free play is child-led, allowing for creativity, exploration, and autonomy (Weisberg et al., 2020). Balancing these two types of play

in the classroom ensures that children receive both purposeful, skill-building opportunities and the freedom to engage in self-directed learning experiences (Annet, 2024).

My Use of Structured Play in my Classroom. Structured play provides children with guidance, scaffolding, and targeted skill development, often blending play with academic and social learning (Pellegrini, 2011). I incorporate structured play into daily activities by using thematic centers, guided dramatic play, movement-based games, and cooperative problem-solving activities. One example of structured play is my dramatic play centers, which rotate themes based on our curriculum. If we are learning about community helpers, I set up a 'Kindergarten Town' where children take on the roles of doctors, firefighters, bakers, and mail carriers. Though the children lead their interactions, I provide specific learning prompts such as, 'What does a firefighter say when there's an emergency?' or 'How do you write a letter to be mailed?' This type of guided play strengthens vocabulary, social skills, and real-world connections, while still allowing for creative expression (Bailey et al., 2019).

Another structured play activity I use is movement-based learning games. For example, during our sight word scavenger hunt, I hide words around the room, and students must 'rescue' them like superheroes, reading the words aloud as they find them. In math, we use structured games with rules, such as 'Roll & Cover', number hopscotch, or 'Shape Detectives,' where children search the room for hidden shapes. These activities blend physical movement with academic learning, helping students develop gross motor skills, problem-solving abilities, and focus while still playing (Denham et al., 2019).

My Use of Free Play in My Classroom. Each type of play serves a unique and essential role in child development, and by incorporating multiple forms of play into my teaching, I create an environment where learning is joyful, meaningful, and deeply connected to real-world

experiences. Whether through exploratory play, movement-based adventures, dramatic role-playing, or creative storytelling, play helps children develop problem-solving skills, emotional resilience, and strong social connections. By embracing my Joker and Explorer play personalities, I ensure that my classroom is a place where learning feels magical, curiosity is encouraged, and every child can learn in a way that feels natural and engaging (Brown, 2020).

The Power Play in My Experiences

Play is not just an escape; it is a foundation. It is joy in the face of adversity. It is the spark that allows children to dream beyond their realities and build the resilience to shape their futures (Masten, 2001). Parents of my students often describe my teaching practices as 'magical' and 'fairytale-like,' reflecting the sense of wonder, joy, and connection I strive to foster in my classroom. Through the power of play, I create immersive learning experiences that support relationship-building, social-emotional learning, and positive mental health and well-being (Jones & Kahn, 2020). This approach not only enhances children's educational experiences but also reinforces their sense of self-worth and belonging (Whitebread, 2019).

My Play Experiences in Different Educational Settings

Play takes on different forms depending on the educational setting, influenced by institutional goals, regulations, and available resources. While research supports the benefits of play in early childhood education, the degree to which it is implemented varies across different environments (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Private childcare centers often emphasize play as a foundational aspect of early learning, but the structure and quality of play experiences depend on curriculum choices, staff training, and financial investment (NAEYC, 2021). Head Start programs integrate play within a structured framework designed to support social-emotional and cognitive development for children from low-income families, though federal guidelines and

mandated assessments can limit opportunities for unstructured play (NAEYC, 2021). University lab schools serve as research-driven environments where play is not only encouraged but also studied as a model for best practices, providing insights into child development and effective teaching strategies (Weisberg et al., 2013). Public schools, particularly in early elementary grades, face the greatest tension between play-based learning and academic expectations, as standardized testing and curriculum mandates often overshadow opportunities for exploratory play (Nicolopoulou, 2020). Each of these settings presents unique opportunities and challenges, shaping how play is used to support children's development. Having the opportunity to practice teaching in all these varied programs gives me a unique perspective of how play supports children's development.

My Play Experiences in Private Childcare. My first teaching experience was in a private childcare facility, where I began as a teaching assistant and quickly discovered my passion for early childhood education. As I gained experience and pursued my Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, I transitioned into the role of lead teacher, primarily working with preschool-aged children. This setting became the foundation for my belief in the power of play and playful learning behaviors. Unlike more rigid educational environments, private childcare centers often have the flexibility to embrace play-based approaches fully, and I was eager to explore how I could create an engaging, child-centered classroom. As a lead teacher, I carefully designed my classroom environment to prioritize play as the central vehicle for learning. Learning centers were intentionally set up to encourage curiosity, exploration, and collaboration. The block area became a space where children experimented with engineering concepts and spatial awareness, while the dramatic play corner allowed them to express creativity, practice social skills, and develop problem-solving abilities (NAEYC, 2021). Sensory

bins provided hands-on experiences that engaged children in scientific exploration, and our literacy area was filled with books and storytelling prompts that encouraged early reading and language development (Weisberg et al., 2013).

By observing children during play, I quickly noticed how deeply engaged they were in these experiences. Their excitement was contagious! When they were fully immersed in play, their energy and enthusiasm fueled my own passion for supporting their learning. One of the most rewarding aspects of implementing playfulness was witnessing first-hand how children grew in their development. Play was not just entertainment; it was a powerful tool that supported cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth. I observed children developing problem-solving skills as they built elaborate structures in the block center, learning to negotiate and collaborate in dramatic play, and building resilience as they experimented, failed, and tried again in hands-on activities (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Their ability to regulate emotions, communicate with peers, and express their creativity flourished in a play-rich environment, reinforcing my commitment to ensuring that play was not just encouraged but embedded in our daily routines.

Over the years, I transitioned from the classroom into an administrative role as a director, where I could facilitate play-based curriculum across the entire school. This shift allowed me to take my belief in play-based learning beyond my own classroom and support other educators in implementing developmentally appropriate, play-driven teaching methods. Not only was play encouraged, but it was expected, as our center was a 4-star facility and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These high standards emphasized the importance of child-led learning, active engagement, and meaningful interactions between teachers and children (NAEYC, 2021). I worked closely with teachers, modeling how to integrate play into their daily lessons, demonstrating how to scaffold learning experiences, and

reinforcing that play was not a break from learning; it was the learning. My time in private childcare solidified my understanding that when children are engaged in meaningful play, their development flourishes. As both a teacher and director, I saw the transformative power of play in action. It was not just about allowing children to explore their interests but about creating an environment where curiosity was nurtured, problem-solving was encouraged, and learning felt joyful. This experience laid the foundation for my belief that play is not an extra component of education; it is the heart of how young children learn best.

My Play Experiences in Head Start. After my experience in private childcare, my next opportunity was transitioning into the role of a paraprofessional in a Head Start program. This move was intentional, as I was continuing my education at the college level in child development, I learned about the Head Start program. I knew that the children in Head Start often came from backgrounds that reflected my own, and I wanted to be part of a system that provided not just education but stability, support, and advocacy for families facing adversity. Head Start programs serve children from low-income backgrounds, many of whom have experienced significant challenges, including trauma and instability. Research highlights the importance of high-quality early learning experiences in promoting resilience and long-term success for children in these environments (Masten, 2001). I understood firsthand the impact of these challenges and believed that, through play and playfulness, I could create a space where children felt safe, valued, and eager to learn in a program like Head Start.

During my time at Head Start, I witnessed how powerful play was in building relationships and fostering engagement. Many of the children in the program had difficulty trusting adults or regulating their emotions due to their early life experiences and trauma. However, play provided a way to connect with them in a developmentally appropriate and

meaningful way (Jones et al., 2019). Play allowed the children to express themselves without the pressure of formal expectations and provided a safe structure for practicing social-emotional skills. Through guided play experiences, I saw children develop confidence, learn to communicate their needs, and engage with peers in ways that supported their cognitive and emotional growth (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

One of the most profound experiences that shaped my understanding of play's impact was working with a young girl, Leslie. When she first entered my classroom, she had already experienced significant trauma, repeated sexual abuse, multiple foster placements, and developmental delays from fetal alcohol syndrome. Initially, she struggled with emotional regulation, often expressing frustration through negative language and physically aggressive behaviors. Rather than enforcing strict behavioral expectations, I relied on play as a bridge to connection. I met her where she was, engaging in pretend play, modeling positive interactions, and providing consistency in routines. Over time, as we engaged in play together, I saw a shift. She began to seek me out for comfort, engage more in activities, and develop foundational social and communication skills. This transformation reinforced what research suggests; when children feel safe and connected, their ability to learn and develop flourishes (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Inspired by experiences like Leslie's, I eventually transitioned into the role of lead teacher in Head Start, where I worked closely with children facing significant challenges in emotional regulation and mental health. I became the teacher the administrators preferred to place these children within the program. I accepted them with open arms and kept the philosophy of play at the center of my practices. Play continued to be my most powerful tool, not only to support their learning but to create spaces where they could process emotions, build resilience, and develop self-regulation approaches (Jones et al., 2019). Through dramatic play, sensory

exploration, and hands-on learning, I saw children develop the ability to express emotions in healthy ways, learn conflict-resolution skills, and form trusting relationships with peers and teachers. Head Start programs emphasize family engagement as a crucial component of early childhood education, and I embraced the opportunity to support caregivers in understanding the importance of play in their child's development (NAEYC, 2021). I worked closely with families, providing strategies for incorporating playfulness at home and ensuring they had access to the resources they needed to support their child's well-being. These relationships were essential in fostering consistency between home and school, which research suggests is a key factor in promoting long-term social-emotional development (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

As I continued to grow in my career, I transitioned into a director position at an English Language Learner (ELL) Head Start, where many of our students were from non-English-speaking households. Here, I saw how play became a universal language. Even when children spoke different native languages, they could engage in play together, communicate through gestures, and build relationships without needing words. I worked with teachers to integrate playfulness into language development, using puppetry, storytelling, dramatic play, and hands-on exploration to help children acquire language skills naturally. Research shows that play supports language acquisition by providing meaningful, context-rich interactions, allowing children to connect language with experiences in a way that direct instruction alone cannot achieve (Weisberg et al., 2013). Through these approaches, I saw children gain confidence in their communication skills, take risks in speaking new words, and feel more comfortable engaging in social interactions, building upon their well-being and promoting better mental health.

My years in Head Start reinforced what research supports, play is not just an instructional strategy; it is a fundamental tool for supporting children's emotional, social, and cognitive

development (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Whether it was helping children regulate emotions, teaching foundational language skills, or breaking down social barriers, play was always at the core. These experiences further strengthened my belief that play is an essential element of early childhood education—one that should not be sacrificed in the pursuit of academic rigor but instead embraced as the most effective and developmentally appropriate approach to learning (NAEYC, 2021).

My Play Experiences in Lab-Schools. My time working in a university laboratory school as a graduate student and assistant provided me with a perspective on playfulness that I had never fully considered before. Up until this point, my experiences had been primarily in private childcare and Head Start programs, where play was often a means of intervention, a tool to heal, regulate, and provide stability for children experiencing adversity. I had always understood play as essential for children navigating trauma, poverty, and instability. Still, I had never deeply considered its equally powerful impact on children who did not face these barriers.

The children in the lab school came from predominantly white, middle-class families with strong parental support. Unlike the students I had previously worked with, these children were not facing food insecurity, unstable housing, or significant emotional trauma. Their families had access to enrichment programs, stable routines, and high-quality early childhood education from birth. Before this experience, I had unconsciously believed that play was something critical for children from underprivileged backgrounds, a way to counteract the effects of trauma, build resilience, and create opportunities they otherwise would not have had. However, as I observed the deep, meaningful learning happening through play in the lab school setting, I realized that play was just as essential for children in privileged environments as it was for those facing adversity (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). I had spent years advocating for play as a means of survival,

as a tool that helped children regulate their emotions, learn social skills, and build resilience against the weight of trauma. But in the lab school, I saw that play was not just for children overcoming challenges; it was just as vital for children who had never experienced crisis or scarcity. Here, play was used not just for emotional regulation, but for deep cognitive growth, problem-solving, creativity, and relationship-building (Weisberg et al., 2013).

With the lab school's high teacher-to-child ratio, children had the opportunity to extend their play experiences with adult support and guidance, rather than relying on play for self-soothing or emotional escape. I saw play in a new light, as something that was not just helping children heal but helping them thrive. With access to thoughtfully designed play spaces, enriched learning environments, and educators trained in child development, these children were able to explore, create, and take risks in ways that traditional, rigid educational structures would have never allowed (NAEYC, 2021). This realization deeply impacted the way I viewed my role as an educator. Play was not just a means to help children who were struggling; it was the way all children, regardless of their background, made sense of the world. Seeing this changed how I taught children, helping me recognize that play was not only beneficial but necessary for every child's development, whether they came from privilege or hardship (Jones et al., 2019).

This realization also transformed how I approached parenting my own child. During my time at the lab school, I was not just an educator; I was a mother working her way out of poverty and breaking generational cycles. My daughter was enrolled in the program, and for the first time, I saw how play was not just helping her cope but thrive in ways I had never experienced as a child myself. Unlike the children I had previously worked with, or myself, she had stability, access to enriching experiences, and teachers who understood the importance of playfulness. She has sensory processing disorder (SPD), which made traditional learning structures difficult for

her. Seeing how play was used intentionally to support her development, through sensory play, movement-based activities, and structured social interactions, was a turning point in both my parenting and my professional philosophy. Play was not just helping her adjust to the world but giving her the tools to navigate it confidently (Jones et al., 2019). As I watched her flourish in an environment that prioritized play, curiosity, and exploration, I became even more determined to pursue higher education and ensure that my career was built on advocating for play as a universal right for all children.

My brief time in the lab school environment was one of the most transformative experiences of my career. It forced me to confront my own biases, challenge my previous assumptions about who play was most important for, and deepen my understanding of how play supports all children, regardless of background. I left this experience not only with a stronger sense of my role as an educator but also with a renewed determination to fight for equitable access to play-based learning. Moving forward, I carried these lessons with me: play is not just a tool for survival, but a foundation for thriving. Whether working with children from privileged backgrounds or those overcoming systemic barriers, the need for play remains universal. As I pursued higher education, continued my advocacy, and refined my philosophy of teaching, I remained committed to ensuring that play was recognized not as an extra, but as the most developmentally appropriate and effective way for all children to learn, grow, and thrive (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). I was eager to take this stance into the next chapter of my teaching career as I went into public education.

My Play Experiences in Public Education. Bringing my experiences from private childcare, Head Start, and the university lab school into public education, I have remained committed to ensuring that play is at the heart of my classroom practices, particularly for

children with high needs. Unlike my previous experiences, where play was encouraged and widely accepted, the public school system often requires justification, research, and data-driven evidence to defend play-based learning. As early childhood education has become increasingly academic-focused, play is often seen as expendable rather than essential.

In 2017, I transitioned from a traditional early childhood education classroom into a self-contained early childhood classroom serving students in kindergarten through third grade in a special education classroom in a public school for students the system deemed emotionally disturbed, an environment where extreme behaviors such as violent outbursts, classroom destruction, and emotional dysregulation were daily realities. The learning environment relied on rigid, compliance-based instruction, but it was immediately clear that this approach was failing my students (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Traditional methods could not address the developmental delays, trauma, social-emotional challenges, or behavioral needs they brought into the classroom each day (Jones et al., 2019). Desperate to help them succeed, I made a bold shift; I replaced the workbooks with play-based learning centers.

I set the classroom up just as I would an early childhood classroom with play-based learning centers. I redesigned our daily schedule to prioritize joy, emotional regulation, and meaningful learning experiences. Every morning began with a dance party, setting a positive tone for the day and helping students release excess energy before transitioning into academics. Laughter became part of our culture with a joke of the day, a simple yet powerful way to build rapport and social engagement. We followed this with a restorative circle, providing a structured space where students could express emotions, resolve conflicts, and practice self-awareness and empathy (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). To ensure students had ample time for self-directed exploration and relationship-building, I embedded 30 to 45 minutes of free-choice play daily,

where they could engage in hands-on, creative, and sensory activities. I also incorporated additional recess periods, understanding that unstructured outdoor play was just as critical to their regulation and well-being as structured lessons (Whitebread, 2019).

My academic instruction shifted, fully integrating more play into learning. Math lessons involved building with manipulatives, literacy activities became storytelling and role-playing experiences, and science exploration was centered around inquiry and hands-on experimentation. I observed a dramatic transformation, by integrating hands-on, movement-based, and imaginative play. Within six weeks, the classroom climate improved, students became more emotionally regulated, behavioral incidents decreased, and genuine relationships began to form (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020; Whitebread, 2019).

This experience profoundly reshaped my understanding of learning, development, and the role of teacher identity in creating inclusive, responsive educational environments and has been a guiding light to my practices (Williams, 2021). It was no longer enough to simply teach; I needed to understand how to advocate for my students' holistic development through playfulness and social-emotional learning. I needed for every child I taught to have a sense of joy in their day learning with me. This realization led me to further academic exploration. I pursued graduate certifications in literacy, school counseling, and education administration to better understand how to support students beyond the classroom, basically anything I could learn to better support the children I teach. These experiences deepened my commitment to early childhood education, mental health advocacy, and teacher preparation, ultimately leading me to this study to pursue a doctorate in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum with a focus on playfulness, social-emotional learning, and teacher identity. This study is not just an academic pursuit, it is a

direct reflection of my journey as an educator, one shaped by the belief that play is a powerful tool for learning, healing, and transformation (Bandura, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Throughout my career, I have intentionally chosen to work in Title 1 schools, knowing that these environments serve children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom have experienced trauma, instability, or learning difficulties like I did as a child. I have also actively sought to have children with high emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs placed in my classroom because I believe that playfulness is one of the most effective approaches for supporting their growth, resilience, and academic success (Jones et al., 2019). Many of these children struggle with traditional instructional methods, requiring movement, hands-on engagement, and relationship-building to thrive. Through play, I have been able to create a structured yet flexible environment where children feel safe, can regulate their emotions, and engage in meaningful learning experiences. Play allows children to express themselves, process emotions, and build connections with their peers and teachers in ways that direct instruction often cannot achieve (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Whether it is dramatic play to help children reenact real-life situations, sensory play to support self-regulation, or cooperative games to develop conflict-resolution skills, I have found that children with high needs benefit immensely from play-based approaches (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Unlike my experiences in Head Start or lab schools, where play was built into the curriculum, public education requires constant advocacy for play-based learning. It is often viewed as a waste of instructional time. Administrators and policymakers often emphasize standardized testing, structured curriculum programs, and early literacy interventions that leave little room for child-directed play (Nicolopoulou, 2020). In my role, I have had to justify play as a research-backed, data-supported instructional strategy rather than simply a developmentally

appropriate practice. I consistently use research and my classroom data to defend playfulness as an evidence-based approach that enhances both academic and social-emotional outcomes. My journals often reflect my concerns about whether I am living up to the standards of the stakeholders of public education with excerpts such as this reflection supporting my use of play in the classroom; "I sometimes struggle with the balance between meeting academic standards and fostering creativity through play. Today, during a process art session, I caught myself thinking, 'Should we be doing something more productive?' But when a child showed me their painting and said, *'This is my happy world,'* I realized this *is* productive, just in a different way." My classroom data has shown that students who engage in playfulness demonstrate stronger problem-solving skills, increased engagement, and greater retention of concepts compared to those receiving traditional direct instruction alone. Research supports this, indicating that play-based learning improves executive functioning, social skills, and language development, all of which are critical for success in early education (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). To support my advocacy for play, I provide ongoing documentation of student progress, including observational notes, student work samples, and behavioral data that highlight the ways play fosters meaningful learning experiences. I have presented student growth data to administrators, showing that children who engage in playfulness develop stronger foundational skills in literacy, math, and social-emotional regulation compared to their peers in more rigid, worksheet-driven environments.

One of the most significant ways I have seen play transform learning is in my work with children who have experienced trauma, neglect, or emotional dysregulation. Many of the students placed in my classroom come with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that impact their ability to learn in traditional settings (Masten, 2001), which I can relate to from my own

childhood experiences relating to theirs. For these students, play is not just an instructional tool, it is a therapeutic intervention that provides stability, consistency, and a means of expressing emotions in a safe and controlled way. For example, I have used dramatic play and storytelling as a way for children to work through difficult emotions and practice problem-solving scenarios. I can share my stories to relate to theirs in a developmentally appropriate manner, and they can share theirs. Sensory play has also been particularly effective in helping students with emotional dysregulation, allowing them to engage in tactile experiences that promote self-soothing and mindfulness (Jones et al., 2019). Playfulness also helps children develop resilience, as it provides opportunities for trial and error, risk-taking, and perseverance in a supportive, low-stakes environment (Weisberg et al., 2013).

The Role of the Teacher and Teacher Identity in Playfulness

The role of the teacher in playfulness is active, intentional, and deeply engaging, requiring educators to create environments that support structured and unstructured play, observe interactions, scaffold learning, and add layers of playfulness to enrich children's experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). A well-designed play-based classroom is not just a space for free play; it is a carefully curated environment where materials, activities, and teacher involvement work together to promote cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). During a parent interview, one shared “The environment that you create, with the way you do things, allows you to engage everyone, while still meeting everyone’s needs” (Parent interview, personal interaction, 2025).

In my classroom, setting up an intentional play-based environment begins with thoughtful organization of learning centers that invite curiosity, creativity, and exploration. The dramatic play area is equipped with rotating themes. One week, it might be a restaurant; the next, a

veterinarian's office, and later, a construction site. Each is designed to encourage role-playing, problem-solving, and language development. By including real-world literacy elements like menus, appointment books, and receipts, children naturally engage in reading, writing, and mathematical thinking in ways that feel meaningful (Weisberg et al., 2020). When I step into the play, I take on roles to enhance their engagement. As a customer, I might dramatically complain, 'Oh no! I forgot my shopping list! Can you help me write it down?' or as a patient at the vet, I might say, 'Doctor, my dog has a problem, but I don't know what's wrong! What should I do?' prompting critical thinking, communication, and empathy.

The block center is another key part of my play-based classroom, designed to foster science, technology, engineering, art, math skills, spatial reasoning, and collaboration. Here, I provide open-ended materials such as wooden blocks, ramps, and figurines, allowing children to construct, experiment, and problem-solve. To scaffold their learning, I ask guiding questions such as, "How can we make this bridge strong enough to hold the cars?" or "What happens if we add another layer to your tower?" By offering challenges rather than directives, I encourage children to test ideas, take risks, and refine their thinking, reinforcing the constructivist approach to learning (Annet, 2024).

Social-emotional learning is naturally embedded in play, and my role as a teacher is to support and guide interactions. Many young children struggle with conflict resolution, turn-taking, and managing emotions, and play provides an opportunity to practice these skills in real time. In the dramatic play center, I have seen children argue over roles, leading to frustration. Instead of stepping in to dictate a solution, I take a playful approach: 'Oh no, we have two chefs in the kitchen! Maybe one of you can be the head chef and the other can be the assistant. What

do you think?' This strategy allows children to navigate compromise and leadership roles, while I serve as a coach rather than an authority figure (Bailey et al., 2019).

Outdoor and movement-based play is another area where intentional teacher involvement enhances learning. During recess or outdoor exploration, I become an active participant, often joining children in games, building challenges, or imaginative play scenarios. When a group of students decides to build an obstacle course, I might add a layer of playfulness by exclaiming, 'I bet no one can make it through the lava without falling in!' This not only increases engagement, but also encourages problem-solving, risk-taking, and teamwork. Research confirms that guided outdoor play helps children develop physical coordination, executive functioning, and resilience (Ginsburg, 2021).

Beyond the classroom, playfulness is also a key tool for emotional regulation and supporting students with behavioral challenges. I once had a student who struggled with impulsivity and frustration during transitions. Rather than relying solely on direct behavioral interventions, I used playful approaches to create smoother transitions. We became 'secret spies' sneaking quietly to the next activity or astronauts preparing for takeoff. This playful approach diffuses anxiety, provides a sense of control, and transforms an everyday task into a fun and manageable experience. Teachers also play a crucial role in advocating for play-based learning, particularly in public schools where academic expectations often overshadow developmentally appropriate practices. I have had to defend play as an instructional strategy to administrators by documenting student progress, collecting observational data, and showcasing how play fosters critical thinking, literacy, numeracy, and self-regulation (Nicolopoulou, 2020).

Ultimately, the role of the teacher in playfulness is multifaceted; we are architects of the environment, facilitators of inquiry, models of social-emotional learning, and advocates for

play's essential role in education (Annet, 2024; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2020). By intentionally designing play spaces, scaffolding interactions, embedding playful teaching approaches, and championing the value of play, teachers create classrooms where learning is not just an obligation but a joyful, engaging, and meaningful experience (Annet, 2024).

I believe the role of the teacher in playfulness is essential because teachers are the bridge between play and deep, meaningful learning. While children are naturally curious and creative, it is the teacher who sets the stage, facilitates engagement, and ensures that play is developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and purposeful (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Without intentional teacher involvement, play can remain surface-level or disconnected from broader learning goals. However, when teachers carefully design play environments, scaffold interactions, and model playfulness, they enhance children's ability to develop critical thinking skills, social-emotional competencies, and academic knowledge in ways that are engaging and natural (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). My beliefs are witnessed through my practices as supported by my families. One family, who has had three children go through my program, shared during an interview, "When you combine the play with the act of learning. It sets in for them in a whole lot more… every day was a playful exchange of knowledge" (Parent interview, personal communication, 2025).

How Playfulness Supports Social-Emotional Learning

Play is a powerful tool for social-emotional learning because it provides children with opportunities to express emotions, develop relationships, practice self-regulation, and navigate social challenges in a natural, low-pressure environment (Bailey et al., 2019). In early childhood, children are still learning how to understand and manage their feelings, communicate their needs, and build connections with peers and adults. Play allows them to explore emotions, practice

conflict resolution, and develop empathy in a way that feels safe and engaging (Weisberg et al., 2020).

Supporting Emotional Processing

One of the most profound ways I have seen play support emotional processing was through Lucy, a little girl who joined my kindergarten class just months after her baby sister had passed away. When Lucy first started school, she was quiet, withdrawn, and hesitant to engage with peers. However, during free play, she gravitated toward the doll center, where she repeatedly chose the smallest baby doll, cradling it, wrapping it in blankets, and whispering soft words as she rocked it. She would often pretend to be the baby's mother or big sister, taking extra care to keep the doll warm and safe. At first, I simply observed, knowing that play can be a powerful way for children to process grief (Ginsburg, 2021). Over time, I gently engaged with her play, saying things like "Your baby looks so loved. Tell me about her." Through these moments, Lucy spoke about her sister, sharing her feelings of sadness, confusion, and longing, all within the safety of her pretend play. With continued support, she began interacting more with classmates, inviting others to help care for the baby doll, symbolizing her own healing process. Play became a bridge for her grief, allowing her to express emotions she was not yet able to verbalize in other settings.

Supporting Self-Regulation

Play also fosters self-regulation and connection for children with unique communication needs. Peyton, a little boy in my class who was deaf, initially had no way to communicate with peers and struggled with frustration and self-regulation. He would often sit alone, unable to participate in traditional classroom conversations. However, one day during free play, he discovered the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse playset. He became deeply engaged in moving the

characters, creating scenarios, and interacting with the figures, drawing the attention of other children. As his classmates joined in the play, they developed their own ways to communicate, often using gestures, facial expressions, and turn-taking cues. Over time, Peyton began to self-regulate more effectively, staying engaged in play for longer periods, watching and imitating his peers, and learning to express his emotions through actions rather than frustration. Play provided him with a sense of inclusion and a way to form relationships, despite the communication barrier. Research shows that play is a critical tool for children with disabilities or language delays, as it allows them to engage in shared experiences and develop social connections in nonverbal ways (Annet, 2024).

Perhaps one of the most important play-based centers in my classroom, which all my children continuously use, is the Safe Place. It is a carefully designed space where children can practice self-regulation, process emotions, and engage in calming play. Rooted in Conscious Discipline, the Safe Place is not a punitive time-out area but rather an inviting environment where children are encouraged to recognize their feelings, use self-soothing strategies, and regain emotional control before rejoining the classroom community (Bailey, 2015). I had a student who had lost his father in a horrible accident early in the school year who utilized this center more than any student I have ever had utilized it. In fact, he spent most of his days in this center processing feelings in many ways, but at least he was processing his feelings in some way. One evening, I received an email from his grieving mother with a short message that read, “Thank you for helping him” (Parent email, personal communication, 2023). Attached was an image of a corner of his mother’s bedroom where he had replicated our Safe Place center. He had arranged pillows, drawings of our breathing techniques, and stuffed animals, along with a sign labeling it *Mommy’s Safe Place*. Understanding how my classroom practices had supported him, while

giving the confidence to try to apply those practices to help his mother self-regulate and process trauma was incredibly impactful. This experience supports the practice of playfulness for social and emotional supports in education. I have found that when children are given structured yet flexible opportunities to regulate emotions through play, they develop greater emotional intelligence and resilience, allowing them to engage more fully in learning (Bailey et al., 2019).

The Safe Place is intentionally designed as a play-based center rather than simply a quiet corner. Children are naturally drawn to hands-on, sensory-rich experiences, and this space provides opportunities to explore emotions through interactive tools and materials. Stuffed animals and dolls offer comfort, allowing children to express and process feelings through nurturing behaviors. Many times, I have observed students holding a doll and whispering softly, mirroring the care they receive in the classroom and reinforcing empathy. Feeling charts and mirrors provide a way for children to visually identify their emotions, helping them make connections between their internal feelings and outward expressions. This is especially helpful for children who struggle with emotional vocabulary, as it allows them to label and process emotions nonverbally (Ginsburg, 2021).

Breathing tools such as pinwheels and bubbles encourage mindful breathing as a calming strategy, making self-regulation engaging and tangible. When a child becomes overwhelmed, they can use these tools to slow their breathing and regain a sense of control. One day, a student named Jaxon, frustrated over a writing assignment, walked over to the Safe Place and instinctively picked up a pinwheel. As he focused on deep breaths to make it spin, I watched as his shoulders relaxed and his frustration melted away. Research supports that structured breathing exercises help children transition from heightened emotional states to a more regulated and engaged mindset, allowing them to return to learning with renewed focus (Bailey, 2015).

Sensory items such as squishy balls, weighted lap pads, and calming jars filled with glitter and water provide additional tools for tactile stimulation and grounding emotions. One of the most powerful examples of this was with Sophia, a child who frequently became overwhelmed when things did not go as planned or if plans changed her routines. One afternoon, after struggling to build a tall tower in the block area, she stormed off to the Safe Place. She picked up a calming jar, shook it aggressively, and sat watching the glitter swirl before slowly settling to the bottom. After a few deep breaths, she picked up a stuffed animal, gave it a tight hug, and then returned to her group, this time approaching her play with more patience and flexibility. This moment demonstrated how play-based self-regulation strategies empower children to manage emotions independently (Weisberg et al., 2020).

Supporting Conflict Resolution

Beyond individual experiences, play naturally integrates key social-emotional skills, such as turn-taking, empathy, and perspective-taking. In my classroom, I have seen children resolve conflicts over toys, comfort each other in pretend play scenarios, and collaborate on problem-solving during building activities. When a child becomes upset during a game, their peers often step in to offer solutions, demonstrating growing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills (Bailey et al., 2019). Dramatic play is one of the most effective ways to help children explore different emotions, understand the experiences of others, and build resilience (Weisberg et al., 2020). I have witnessed this in action many times in my experiences, and my own personal reflections highlight a moment when a child navigated problem-solving with others:

> In the dramatic play center, the kids decided to open a pretend restaurant, but they were arguing about how to divide the tasks. Jacob wanted to be the cook and the waiter,

> while the others tried to suggest different roles. He stopped, thought for a moment, and said, *'Wait. I can do hard things, but I need help to do this one right.'* Hearing him acknowledge both his determination and the value of teamwork was a breakthrough. They quickly worked together, dividing roles. The restaurant was a huge success. (Personal journal, 2022).

This moment validated the impact of my teaching because it showed that the language I am teaching during our interactions in play is authentically applied by the children in meaningful ways. It was a powerful example of how classroom support during play builds conflict resolution skills and collaboration amongst peers. Play is more than just an enjoyable activity; it is a vital component of social-emotional learning that helps children process emotions, connect with others, and develop the skills needed for lifelong emotional well-being (Brown, 2018). Whether through grief play, self-regulation in social settings, or collaborative problem-solving, play provides children with a safe space to practice and internalize the social and emotional skills they will need throughout their lives.

How Playfulness Supports Mental Health and Well-Being

Research has increasingly linked the decline in children's mental health to the reduction in opportunities for independent, unstructured play. Over the past several decades, children have experienced a significant decrease in free play, largely due to heightened academic pressures, increased screen time, and parental concerns about safety, all of which have limited their ability to engage in spontaneous, imaginative activities (Ginsburg, 2021). This decline in play has coincided with a notable rise in anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation among children, suggesting that a lack of play may be a contributing factor to the mental health crisis in youth (Bethell et al., 2019). Studies indicate that free play fosters resilience, problem-solving

skills, and emotional regulation, helping children manage stress and navigate social interactions in ways that structured activities do not provide (Bailey et al., 2019). Experts argue that restoring time for child-led play is essential for reversing these negative mental health trends, as it allows children to develop autonomy, self-confidence, and coping mechanisms necessary for lifelong emotional well-being (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2024).

Over the past few years, I have witnessed firsthand a noticeable decline in the mental health of my students, a trend that deeply concerns me as an educator. More and more children are entering kindergarten with heightened anxiety, difficulty regulating emotions, and an increased need for social-emotional support (Bethell et al., 2019; Denham et al., 2019). Where once I saw students enter my classroom eager to engage in play and interact with their peers, I now frequently encounter children who struggle to separate from caregivers, display high levels of stress in unfamiliar situations, or experience emotional outbursts due to difficulty coping with everyday challenges (Bailey et al., 2019). These changes have reinforced my belief in the importance of play as a tool for emotional regulation, resilience-building, and mental health and well-being, but they have also illuminated the urgent need for stronger mental health support systems within schools (Ginsburg, 2021).

Playfulness Offers Self-Regulation and Release

One of the most profound ways I have seen play support mental health is in helping children develop self-regulation and engagement, particularly for those with behavioral challenges. A student named James was diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and often struggled with authority, transitions, and structured activities. When he first joined my class, he refused to participate in group lessons, frequently defied instructions, and avoided engaging in learning tasks. Traditional behavior management techniques were ineffective, as

direct instructions often escalated his frustration. However, I noticed that he was drawn to our classroom's block center, where he would build elaborate structures in isolation. Rather than forcing him into academic tasks he resisted, I used play as an entry point for engagement. One day, I sat next to James and casually asked, "Can you show me how to build a strong bridge? I think I need some help." This simple invitation shifted the power dynamic, allowing him to take on the role of the 'expert' rather than feeling pressured into a structured lesson. He eagerly explained his process and, before long, he was talking through his problem-solving strategies, making eye contact, and engaging in back-and-forth conversation. Over time, I extended this engagement by integrating math and science concepts into his play, asking questions like, 'How many blocks do you think we need to make this taller?' or 'What happens if we change the base?' As his confidence grew, so did his willingness to engage in group activities. By the middle of the school year, he had transitioned from avoiding structured learning to actively leading small group projects in the block center.

During an interview with his family, they shared how they felt I "Set him up to identify if something is wrong in the first place, if there is an issue to ask for help" (Parent interview, personal communication, 2025). This experience reinforced the transformative power of play in supporting children with behavioral challenges, providing them with a sense of control, a safe space to develop self-regulation, and an opportunity to engage with peers on their own terms, not only in the classroom but also carried over into their home (Beltrán et al., 2021).

Playfulness to Process Trauma

Play also helps children process trauma and navigate major life changes in a way that feels safe and empowering. One of the most powerful examples of this in my classroom was with Daniel, a student who had recently entered foster care. In the first few weeks of school, he

resisted participation, avoided peer interactions, and often sat alone during playtime. However, I noticed that he was drawn to the construction center, where he quietly built houses out of wooden blocks every day. Eventually, he began constructing two separate houses and moving small toy people between them, mimicking his recent transition between two foster homes. This play scenario allowed him to process his experience through symbolic play. I joined in one day and asked, "Where are your people going?" He responded, "They have two homes now, but they still see each other." This was a turning point. His play had given him a way to make sense of his new reality, easing his anxiety about his changing family structure. Research confirms that children who have experienced trauma often use play to regain control and process emotions in developmentally appropriate ways (Cook et al., 2017).

Beyond emotional processing, play is essential for helping children develop self-regulation skills, which are directly linked to mental well-being and long-term resilience (Gross, 2008). Many children in my classroom struggle with self-control, impulse regulation, or calming strategies, and play provides structured yet flexible opportunities to practice these skills. One year, I had a student, Mason, who frequently had angry outbursts when he did not get his way. He often reacted by throwing objects, yelling, or refusing to participate. Instead of using traditional discipline, I encouraged him to use the Safe Place center, where he could engage in sensory-based play activities designed to help regulate emotions. I provided sand trays, weighted stuffed animals, and breathing visuals to guide him through calming techniques. Over time, I noticed that instead of reacting impulsively, Mason began gravitating toward the Safe Place on his own when he felt frustrated, squeezing a stress ball or tracing patterns in the sand to help himself calm down. By mid-year, he was able to use self-regulation techniques independently,

even carrying the practices into other parts of the school, demonstrating the long-term impact of play on emotional resilience and impulse control (Giano et al., 2020).

Playfulness for Connection

Play also fosters mental well-being by promoting social connection and reducing feelings of isolation. Children who struggle with anxiety or social difficulties often find comfort in structured play activities that encourage peer collaboration and communication. One student, Eliana, had difficulty making friends and often isolated herself during recess and center time. However, she became interested in cooperative board games, particularly ones involving pretend scenarios like ‘veterinary rescue’ or ‘zookeeper challenges.’ Through these games, she naturally began engaging with classmates, learning how to take turns, communicate ideas, and build friendships. Over time, she became more confident in initiating play with others, reinforcing the idea that structured, interactive play can be a bridge for children who struggle with social-emotional skills (Smith et al., 2019).

Playfulness for Stress Relief

One particularly heartbreaking example of this was a student named Elijah, who came into my class with severe emotional dysregulation and frequent outbursts of frustration. From the first week of school, it was clear that Elijah was experiencing overwhelming levels of stress, a trend that has been noted in early childhood settings nationwide as more young children struggle with emotional regulation (Baumrind, 1966; Finkelhor et al., 2015). If something did not go his way, he would throw things across the room, scream, and retreat into a corner. During transitions, he would shut down, curling into a ball on the floor, refusing to move or engage with his classmates. He struggled with impulse control, lashing out at peers over minor conflicts, and

expressing extreme distress over small changes in routine, all behaviors that research has linked to early experiences of trauma or difficulties with emotional processing (Cook et al., 2017).

I hoped that providing a consistent, structured play-based learning environment would help him feel safe and begin to regulate his emotions. I gave him access to sensory play stations, movement breaks, and imaginative play opportunities, all of which have been shown to promote self-regulation and emotional resilience in young children (Annet, 2024). Over time, he slowly started to engage with these tools. I referred him to small group sessions with the school counselor, where he worked on coping skills and emotional regulation strategies, interventions that have been found to significantly reduce stress-related behaviors in young learners (Bethell et al., 2019). Additionally, I connected his family with an outside mentoring program that provided one-on-one support from a male role model who met with him weekly, an approach backed by research emphasizing the importance of secure adult relationships in helping children build resilience (Bailey et al., 2019; Denham et al., 2019). After months of consistent intervention, playfulness, and mental health support, Elijah began showing significant improvements in his ability to regulate emotions, communicate his needs, and engage positively with peers.

Physical play is another critical component of mental health and emotional regulation for stress release. Movement-based activities, such as outdoor exploration, gross motor games, and pretend play with full-body engagement, help children release stress, regulate their nervous systems, and improve mood stability (Finkelhor et al., 2015). One strategy I use in my classroom is incorporating play-based movement breaks throughout the day to support children's emotional regulation and focus. For example, when I notice the class getting restless, I introduce a playful group challenge, like pretending to be animals in a jungle or balancing on 'lava rocks.' One child, Isaiah, who often struggled with focus and hyperactivity, thrived in these activities. Instead

of feeling frustrated by the need to sit still, he had structured opportunities to move, play, and release energy in a way that helped him re-engage with learning. Research supports that movement-based play reduces stress hormones, increases emotional stability, and supports executive functioning (Lovallo et al., 2012).

These cases are far from unique. Each year, I find myself referring anywhere from 20 to 40 percent of my students for additional mental health services, whether through counseling groups, outside mentoring organizations, or therapy services (Beltrán et al., 2021). Some children require weekly check-ins with the school counselor, while others benefit from small group interventions focused on social skills and emotional regulation, both of which have been shown to significantly improve classroom engagement and long-term emotional well-being (Giano et al., 2020). In more severe cases, I work with families to connect them with outside therapy services, ensuring that students receive the comprehensive mental health support they need (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2024). The reality is that mental health challenges in young children are increasing, and without proper intervention, these struggles can negatively impact their ability to learn, build relationships, and feel safe in a school setting. This is changing how I need to teach (Bailey et al., 2019).

Playfulness as an Intervention for Mental Health

Despite these challenges, I have found that play remains one of the most effective tools for supporting children's mental health. Play provides a safe space for children to express emotions, practice self-regulation, and develop coping strategies in a natural, developmentally appropriate way (Baumrind, 1966; Ginsburg, 2021). Whether through dramatic play that allows children to reenact and process life experiences, sensory play that provides calming stimulation, or social play that fosters peer connection, I have seen firsthand how play can be a form of

healing for children facing emotional difficulties. However, I also recognize that play alone is not always enough, and ensuring that my students have access to the mental health resources and professional support they need is an ongoing priority in my work as an educator (Cook et al., 2017).

Play is a fundamental component of mental health and well-being, providing children with a natural means of processing emotions, developing self-regulation skills, and fostering resilience. Young children often lack the verbal skills to express their emotions clearly, but through play, they externalize their feelings, work through challenges, and build emotional strength in a safe, low-pressure environment (Bethell et al., 2019). Play-based learning environments promote predictability, social connection, and opportunities for emotional release, all of which contribute to children's overall psychological stability (Denham et al., 2019).

Play is not just a leisure activity; it is an essential foundation for mental health, emotional resilience, and self-regulation (Bailey et al., 2019; Bethell et al., 2019; Ginsburg, 2021). Whether through dramatic storytelling, symbolic play, sensory experiences, peer collaboration, or physical movement, play provides children with the tools they need to navigate emotions, cope with stress, and build confidence in managing their mental well-being. By prioritizing play as a core component of learning, educators create an environment where children feel emotionally safe, connected, and equipped with lifelong coping skills (Bethell et al., 2019).

How Playfulness Supports Relationships

Play is a powerful connector, fostering meaningful relationships between teachers and students, peers, and families. In a play-based classroom, learning is not just about academics; it is about connection, trust, and shared experiences that build a strong classroom community (Weisberg et al., 2020). Play naturally fosters collaboration, emotional understanding, and

problem-solving, helping students develop deep bonds with their teacher, their classmates, and even their families through shared play experiences. These relationships extend beyond the kindergarten year, shaping how children engage with learning, friendships, and school (Bailey et al., 2019).

Teacher and Student Relationships

More than just benefiting my students, these relationships shape me as an educator, reinforcing why I believe so strongly in playfulness and deepening my understanding of my role in their development. The relationships I build with my students are rooted in playfulness, shared experiences, and joyful learning. Rather than simply being an instructor, I am an active participant in their world of play, joining them in dramatic play scenarios, pretending to be a character in their stories, or engaging in their imaginative games. This playfulness creates a safe, supportive environment where children feel comfortable taking risks, expressing emotions, and engaging in learning in a way that feels natural to them (Ginsburg, 2021).

One of the most meaningful affirmations of the impact of play on my relationships with students is the lasting connections I have with them even years after they leave my classroom. Former students frequently return to visit, reminiscing about the games, play-based projects, and magical experiences they had in my class. One of the most frequently mentioned memories is ‘Disney Day,’ an immersive experience where I transform the classroom into a pretend trip to Disney World, complete with 3D ride simulations, pretend plane rides, and themed experiences that allow students to engage in imaginative play while learning about different aspects of travel, geography, and storytelling. Students who return often say things like, ‘I still remember Disney Day! That was the best day ever! Can we do it again?’ These memories are not just about academics; they are about the relationships we built through shared play and discovery. Play

creates positive emotional connections to learning and fosters a deep sense of belonging between students and their teachers (Baumrind, 1966).

Returning to the classroom in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges in building relationships with students and families due to social distancing protocols and reduced face-to-face interactions with our mask wearing. Recognizing the barriers to connection, our principal implemented a school-wide morale-building activity, where students created a jar filled with messages expressing appreciation for their teachers. Reading through these notes provided deep insight into how children perceive their relationships with me, highlighting the emotional bonds formed in the classroom despite physical restrictions.

While many of my students acknowledged that I help them learn and treat them with kindness, the messages that had the most profound impact on my teaching philosophy were those that reflected their feelings of safety, love, and belonging. Students wrote about how I made them feel protected, valued, and loved, or like an '*extra mom,*' who takes care of them. Others emphasized that I made them feel smart, special, and happy, with one of the most repeated sentiments being, *'You let us play a lot.'* These reflections reinforced my commitment to playfulness as a means of fostering not only cognitive development but also emotional security and relationship-building. Play, often dismissed as secondary to academic instruction, proved to be an essential component of my students' perceptions of safety, connection, and joy in the classroom (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020).

The experience of teaching during the pandemic solidified my understanding that relationships are the foundation of learning. While the challenges of COVID-19 made it more difficult to build connections in traditional ways, the messages from my students served as a powerful reminder that emotional safety, love, and opportunities for play are just as critical as

academic instruction. Moving forward, I continue to prioritize a classroom environment where children feel secure, valued, and free to explore through play, knowing that these elements are vital for their well-being and success.

A parent recently emailed me, expressing how deeply my playful approach to teaching has impacted her daughter's love of learning. She wrote, "You are like a teacher out of a fairy tale. Every day my daughter comes home talking about something magical she learned in your class. I wish I had experienced school this way." (Parent email, December 2024). This kind of feedback reinforces that play strengthens my connection with students and makes learning something they cherish (Bethell et al., 2019). These relationships are not just meaningful for my students; they profoundly impact me as an educator. Seeing my students light up with joy, watching them problem-solve and collaborate through play, and hearing their laughter in the classroom reminds me why I chose to be a teacher. These moments shape my teacher identity, reinforcing that education is about more than meeting standards; it is about building relationships, fostering confidence, and creating a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.

Student and Peer Relationships

Play also builds strong, empathetic peer relationships, as children learn cooperation, conflict resolution, and emotional understanding through shared experiences. I have seen firsthand how students who engage in play together develop a deep sense of community and care for one another. In my classroom, children naturally step in to help each other, offer encouragement, and celebrate one another's successes. One of the ways I intentionally foster peer relationships through play is through Play Buddies, a bi-weekly program where second-grade students visit our classroom to engage in play-based activities with my kindergarteners. Rather than a traditional book buddy program, this allows older students to guide, mentor, and

collaborate with younger learners through play, strengthening social skills, cooperation, and cross-age friendships. I often see my kindergarteners light up with excitement when their Play Buddies arrive, and the second graders take pride in being leaders and role models in the classroom. One second grader recently told me, “I remember when I was in kindergarten, and we did this. I love being a Play Buddy now!” This experience not only supports social learning, but also builds a sense of school-wide community that lasts beyond the kindergarten year (Denham et al., 2019).

This sense of connection extends beyond kindergarten. Many of my former students continue to look out for one another as they progress through the grades and even into secondary education. I frequently hear stories of students from my class sticking together, offering support, and sharing memories of their playful experiences long after they have left my room. A parent once told me, “My son and his best friend met in your class, and now in fifth grade, they still make up games together just like they did in kindergarten. Their friendship started with play, and it’s still growing today” (Personal Communication, 2023). Research supports that early peer relationships formed through play contribute to long-term social-emotional well-being, teamwork skills, and resilience (Denham et al., 2019).

Teacher and Family Relationships

Play not only strengthens relationships within the classroom, but also creates a bridge between teachers and families. Many parents share that they feel more connected to their child’s learning because of the play-based experiences I document and share. Using platforms like Seesaw, I regularly post photos and videos of play-based activities, giving families a glimpse into the joy and engagement happening in our classroom. Even homework in my classroom is play-based, ensuring that families can engage in learning through play together. Instead of

traditional worksheets, I provide families with play-based activity ideas they can do at home monthly, such as building challenges, storytelling prompts, and movement games. One mother shared, “My son never sees his homework as something he has to do, it’s something he wants to do because it’s always fun and interactive” (Parent Survey, personal communication, 2020). By making play a central part of both school and home learning, families feel more connected to their children’s educational experiences and see firsthand how play enhances learning (Denham et al., 2019).

The relationships built through play extend far beyond my students; they shape me as an educator. The bonds I create with my students, the memories they carry with them, and the joy I see in their eyes remind me that my job is not just about teaching content; it is about fostering a love for learning, making school a safe and magical place, and giving children a foundation of confidence and connection that will follow them for years. These relationships reaffirm my commitment to playfulness and strengthen my belief that education should be filled with wonder, joy, and meaningful connections. Play is not just a method of instruction; it is the heart of who I am as a teacher, shaping my classroom, my philosophy, and my lifelong dedication to making learning magical.

Joy as an Intersecting Theme in Playfulness

Across all data sources in this study, personal narratives, memory work, parent interviews, and classroom observations, the theme of joy emerged as a powerful and consistent element that intersected the original five major thematic categories: *teacher identity*, *playfulness*, *social-emotional learning*, *mental health and well-being*, and *relationships*. While not originally coded as a standalone theme, joy surfaced repeatedly as a defining emotional tone, reflecting the intent and the impact of playfulness in early childhood education. Joy has been described as a

dynamic, relational, and embodied experience that reshapes how children and educators engage with the world (hooks, 1994).

In the context of teacher identity, joy was frequently reflected in journal entries describing moments of deep fulfillment and personal meaning. For example, one excerpt read, "Watching a shy kid step into a leadership role during a game or seeing two kids work out their differences reminded me why I do this work … these kids deserve it" (Christie, Personal Journal, 2019). Here, joy functioned as both a personal motivator and a professional compass, guiding the researcher's commitment to creating emotionally rich, playful environments.

Within the theme of playfulness, joy was woven into the fabric of classroom practices. Reflections frequently described laughter, imaginative storytelling, spontaneous singing, and moments of shared wonder. These joyful expressions were not seen as distractions from learning but rather as indicators that deep, authentic learning was taking place. One child exclaimed, "This is just like the real place!" during a dramatic play reenactment of Disney World, a moment that highlighted how joy fuels engagement, creativity, and memory-making.

In the realm of social-emotional learning, joy was often present in children's language and behavior as they navigated challenges and built friendships. Statements like "We can make it both ways!" during a disagreement in the block center, or "That's okay, I'll get another turn!" during a board game, reflected moments of emotional regulation and empathy that were rooted in shared, joyful experiences. These playful exchanges often served as catalysts for developing social-emotional learning competencies in safe and connected ways.

When examining mental health and well-being, joy emerged not only as an outcome but also as a coping strategy. In one memory work excerpt, a student created a personal Safe Place

for his grieving mother at home, modeling after the play-based regulation space in the classroom. Other reflections described moments where music, movement, and imaginative play helped children (and the teacher) decompress and regain emotional balance. These joyful moments, often small and spontaneous, served as protective factors against stress and anxiety, both for the students and the educator.

Finally, joy served as a relational glue in the theme of relationships. It strengthened bonds between teacher and child, fostered peer-to-peer empathy, and extended into family homes through shared stories, artifacts, and imitation of classroom experiences. One parent shared in their interview, “You brought out a side of them we hadn’t seen before, more confident, more creative,” pointing to the transformative role of joyful play in building connections and identity. Former students also returned years later, recalling immersive experiences like Disney Day as their most meaningful and joyful memories of their school experience.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of joy as a pedagogical and developmental force. Far from being an afterthought, joy was deeply embedded in the learning process, enhancing motivation, deepening relationships, and supporting emotional resilience. This study reaffirms that when joy is intentionally cultivated through play, it becomes not only a developmental asset but a transformative experience for both children and educators.

Conclusion of Findings

By embracing playfulness, I have witnessed how it addresses educational disparities and mental health challenges in low-income communities. It creates an equitable and nurturing space where all children can thrive regardless of their background. Furthermore, playfulness naturally integrates social-emotional learning, helping children develop essential skills such as emotional

regulation, empathy, resilience, and problem-solving. It also enhances engagement and motivation by capturing children's natural curiosity and enthusiasm, leading to a lifelong love of learning (Weissberg et al., 2019). Play fosters positive relationships among children, educators, and families, creating a supportive and effective learning environment. Additionally, for children who have experienced trauma or have special needs, playfulness offers a therapeutic and inclusive approach that supports their healing and development (Murphy et al., 2021).

Through the analysis of data collected in personal narratives, memory work, parent interviews, and parent communications, this study identified six themes: *teacher identity*, *playfulness, social-emotional learning*, *mental health and well-being*, *relationships,* and *joy*. These themes were woven together by a recurring undertone of *joy*, which served as both a pedagogical force and an emotional anchor across the data. Each theme revealed how play-based practices, grounded in strong teacher identity and intentional relational work, support children's holistic development. From personal reflections to family interviews, the findings illustrate that playfulness is not simply an instructional method but a transformative and deeply holistic humanizing approach to education. The data revealed that joy, connection, emotional expression, and resilience are not accidental outcomes of play; they are fundamental components. As this chapter illustrates, having a playful identity, which fosters a playful learning environment, means that children are more likely to thrive in all areas of development.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This autoethnographic study explores how my teacher identity as a veteran early childhood educator, examined through personal narratives and introspection, intersects with and contributes to playfulness, social-emotional learning, children's mental health and well-being, and relationships in early childhood education. This examination should deepen my understanding of how my teaching practices support children's holistic development and might offer valuable insight for improving educational approaches that foster comprehensive child growth. The findings from the data analysis highlight how teacher identity and personal experiences shape the implementation of playfulness, influencing children's ability to develop social-emotional learning skills, regulate emotions, and build social relationships. Findings from this study suggest that playfulness may support the development of self-regulation, peer collaboration, and problem-solving skills within one early education teacher’s experiences, aligning with existing research on the role of play in early childhood development. Additionally, the findings highlight the emotional labor of teaching and how play serves as a form of stress relief and relationship-building for educators as well. The research also underscores the importance of teacher reflexivity, showing that self-awareness and ongoing reflection are crucial for maintaining an inclusive, developmentally appropriate learning environment. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that joy, pedagogical approach, was found as a driving force of success across all the themes.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study align with and expand upon existing theoretical frameworks in early childhood education, particularly Bandura’s (2018) Social Learning Theory,

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Model, and Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Each of these frameworks provides insight into the ways playfulness supports children's social-emotional development and the role of the teacher in shaping these experiences. The study's themes, teacher identity, playfulness, the role of social-emotional learning in play, the role of play on mental health and well-being, and the impact of play and playfulness on relationships demonstrate the interconnectedness of developmental psychology, social learning, and educational practice.

Connection of Findings and Personal Narrative to Theoretical Frameworks

Linking Bandura's Theory

This study reinforces the work of Bandura (2018), whose Social Learning Theory states children learn behaviors, social skills, and emotional regulation through observation, modeling, and interaction with more knowledgeable others. The findings indicate that play-based learning provides a natural setting for social modeling, where children observe and imitate both their peers and teachers in structured and unstructured play activities. Observational data and parent interviews (2025) revealed that children exhibited improved emotional regulation and cooperation through repeated exposure to play-based interactions. These findings suggest that modeling through play fosters and supports social-emotional development. These findings align with research by Vygotsky (1978), which highlights the role of guided play and scaffolding in social development.

Linking Bronfenbrenner's Theory

Additionally, the results are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994), which emphasizes the interaction between individual development and environmental influences. The study findings suggest that play-based learning is most effective when children receive

support across multiple ecological systems, including the classroom and home. Parent interviews (2025) found that children who engaged in play at school demonstrated increased engagement in imaginative play and cooperative behavior outside of the classroom, suggesting that skills learned through play are transferable across different settings. These findings align with prior studies indicating that consistent exposure to play-based learning environments enhances social-emotional competence beyond the classroom (Jones et al., 2019; Nicolopoulou, 2020).

In my classroom, these relationships shape social-emotional learning, mental health, and the overall classroom environment, reinforcing that play is not just a learning tool but a means of building trust, fostering emotional resilience, and strengthening community connections. My teacher-student relationships are central to this microsystem, as I use playfulness to establish trust, create a safe learning space, and encourage students to take risks in their learning and find joy in learning. Through interactive play, storytelling, and playful humor, I ensure that each child feels valued, supported, and emotionally secure, aligning with research that suggests positive teacher-student relationships enhance self-regulation and social competence (Denham et al., 2019). Similarly, student-to-peer relationships within the microsystem flourish in a play-based setting, as children naturally collaborate, problem-solve, and develop empathy through shared play experiences. In my classroom, I have observed how peer interactions during dramatic play, cooperative games, and exploratory learning activities foster deep connections that extend beyond kindergarten. Students learn to navigate social situations, resolve conflicts, and build friendships through play, reinforcing Bronfenbrenner's idea that the microsystem is a space where social behaviors are modeled, reinforced, and internalized (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Additionally, my relationships with families play a crucial role in reinforcing playfulness at home, as I use platforms like Seesaw to document classroom experiences, invite parents to

engage in play-based events, and provide playful learning opportunities for families to explore together. Many parents (personal communication, 2025) have shared how seeing their child's engagement in play has reshaped their view of early education and learning in interviews and surveys, reinforcing that strong teacher-family relationships enhance children's learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom (Bailey et al., 2019). These interconnected relationships within the microsystem reflect Bronfenbrenner's framework, highlighting how the close, supportive connections in my classroom contribute to a child's overall development and success.

Linking to Play Theory

The study's findings also contribute to Play Theory (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020) by reinforcing the idea that play is not just a recreational activity but a fundamental process for learning and development. Specifically, teacher identity emerged as a key factor in how play is facilitated and experienced in early childhood settings. The findings indicate that teachers' personal experiences, beliefs about play, and teaching philosophies influence the structure and effectiveness of play-based learning environments. These findings align with prior research indicating that teachers who embrace play as an essential part of learning are more likely to create rich, engaging play experiences that promote cognitive and social growth (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Discussion of Research Questions

The experiences, practices, and beliefs that have shaped my teaching and research directly inform the research questions guiding this study. My personal and professional journey has reinforced my understanding that playfulness and social-emotional development are deeply intertwined with a teacher's identity, beliefs, and educational setting. This research explores how

teacher identity influences playfulness, how playfulness supports social-emotional development and mental health and well-being, and how playfulness strengthens relationships between educators, children, and families. My firsthand experiences in diverse educational settings provide a rich foundation for examining these questions through an autoethnographic lens, as my journey reflects the broader themes of teacher identity, advocacy, and the impact of playfulness in different environments.

Question 1

The first research question, which explores how my personal experiences, cultural background, playful personality, and professional insights inform my approach to playfulness and social-emotional development, is directly reflected in my evolution as an educator through my teacher identity. The findings reveal that my teacher identity has been profoundly shaped by a combination of personal adversity, childhood play experiences, and professional training. Growing up in a home marked by trauma, I found peace and healing in imaginative play and creative expression. These early experiences instilled in me a deep sensitivity to children's emotional needs and the transformative power of play.

My cultural background emphasized empathy, resilience, and storytelling, all of which continue to inform my classroom presence. Professionally, years of work across Head Start, private childcare, and public education environments sharpened my commitment to developmentally appropriate practices. Collectively, these experiences shaped my identity as a playful, emotionally responsive teacher, guiding how I scaffold children's learning through joy, relational warmth, and emotionally safe spaces. This aligns with research asserting that teacher identity evolves through the interplay of personal biography, pedagogical practice, and relationships (Nasrollahi et al., 2021; Palmer, 2007; Williams, 2021).

Question 2

The second research question, which explores how my facilitation of playfulness impacts children's social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being to also support holistic development, is informed by the direct experiences I have had. In every setting I have worked in, whether with children in Title 1 public schools, Head Start, or high-resource lab schools, I have witnessed how playfulness enhances the lived experience of children. Data across personal parent interviews, my personal narrative and reflections, and parent communications consistently highlighted the impact of my playful teaching on children's development. My intentional use of playfulness, whether through guided games, open-ended exploration, or humor-infused routines, created a climate where students felt safe expressing emotions, solving problems collaboratively, and developing empathy. Children who initially exhibited dysregulation or emotional distress began using methods modeled during play (examples include breathing exercises, turn-taking, imaginative role-play) to navigate challenges. These moments mirror Bandura's (1997) theory of social learning, where behaviors and emotional regulation strategies are internalized through observation and interaction. My playfulness served as a protective factor offering children not only joy, but predictability, stability, connection, and emotional release. These findings confirm current research on the role of play and social-emotional learning in promoting mental health wellness and resilience (Annet, 2024; Bailey, 2015; Jones et al., 2019).

Question 3

The third research question, which explores how playfulness strengthens interpersonal relationships between children, educators, and families, reflects my commitment to creating inclusive, relationship-centered learning environments. My time at Head Start showed me how play builds trust between children and teachers, particularly for children experiencing adversity.

In public education, I have actively worked to bridge the gap between school and home by using play to engage families in their child's learning process. Research supports that when educators integrate play into learning, they foster stronger relationships that enhance children's emotional security and academic motivation (NAEYC, 2021).

Playfulness functioned as both an instructional approach and a bridge between me, the children, and their families. Shared joy and silly interactions helped children view me as emotionally available and trustworthy. Families often commented, through interviews, school social media posts, and personal messages, on the warmth and connection they felt from the classroom environment. Parents described how their children would come home "excited to learn," often retelling classroom stories or mimicking our playful routines. These reciprocal relationships were strengthened through consistent communication, affirmation of each child's individuality, and collaborative problem-solving during times of playfulness. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1994) underscores the influence of close relationships on child development, and this study demonstrates how teacher playfulness can actively shape the microsystem of trust and mutual care. The data collected affirmed that when families feel included and valued, they are more likely to engage in partnership, reinforcing children's sense of belonging and emotional security.

Ultimately, personal life experiences and teaching practices have shaped my playful teacher identity and informed my advocacy for playfulness. These experiences have not only guided the development of my research questions but also positioned me to analyze them through the lens of lived experience and professional expertise. This study is both a reflection of my journey and a contribution to the broader discourse on teacher identity, playfulness, social-

emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships in shaping early childhood education.

Key Insights

As I moved through this autoethnographic study, much of what I uncovered affirmed my long-held beliefs about teaching, learning, and the power of play. My teacher identity, who values connection, creativity, and child-led exploration, was reflected in the personal narratives I revisited, the parent interviews I conducted, and the classroom artifacts I examined. These data sources confirmed what I had intuitively known: that play supports social-emotional growth, fosters relationships, and enhances children's mental well-being.

However, what surprised me was the consistent emergence of joy across all sources of data. Joy was not initially something I had identified as a research focus, yet it surfaced in parent communications, personal journal entries, and my memory work, describing meaningful classroom moments. This discovery prompted me to reexamine how joy functions not just as an emotional response, but as a relational, embodied experience that links play, identity, and learning in powerful ways. Joy became the connection in the data, deepening my understanding of playfulness and transforming my philosophy of learning into one that centers joy as essential to both teaching and development. What began as a study about playfulness in my teacher identity evolved into a deeper exploration of how joy shapes who I am as a teacher and how I engage with the children and families in my care.

The Impact of Teacher Identity on Playfulness

The study revealed that teacher identity significantly shapes the implementation and effectiveness of playful pedagogy. Personal experiences, cultural background, and professional beliefs influence how teachers facilitate, structure, and engage in play within the classroom

(Chang, 2016). My reflections indicated that my own play experiences as a child, as well as my professional growth in early childhood education, inform my approach to using play as a tool for learning, social-emotional learning, supporting mental health, and relationship-building. Through memo writing and memory work, I recognized that my comfort with unstructured, child-led play allows me to create a classroom culture that encourages risk-taking, collaboration, and exploration. In contrast, previous experiences in more rigid educational environments highlighted how teacher apprehension toward playfulness can limit its benefits for students (Ellis et al., 2011).

The findings also emphasize the emotional and mental labor involved in being a play-based educator. Facilitating meaningful play requires not only physical presence but also emotional investment, as I find myself constantly shifting between roles as a mentor, observer, and co-player to ensure play experiences remain developmentally appropriate and enriching. The reciprocal nature of play between teachers and students fosters an emotionally responsive classroom where children feel safe to express, experiment, and connect (Bandura, 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

My Current Identity and Philosophy on Playfulness. My journey from childhood, through diverse teaching experiences, to motherhood has shaped my belief that play is not just a method of learning but a fundamental right for all children. In private childcare, I saw play spark joy and curiosity, laying the foundation for cognitive and social development. At Head Start, I witnessed how play could heal, regulate emotions, and build trust for children who had experienced trauma (Jones et al., 2019). My time in a university laboratory school challenged me to see that play is equally essential for children from privileged backgrounds, reinforcing that play is not just for intervention but for deep learning and problem-solving (Pyle & Danniels,

2017). Becoming a mother solidified this belief, as I saw sensory play and movement-based learning help my own child navigate challenges.

Now, in public education, I apply these lessons by advocating for playfulness in a system that often prioritizes assessments over developmentally appropriate practices (Nicolopoulou, 2020). I intentionally seek to teach students with high emotional and behavioral needs, knowing that play is one of the most powerful tools for learning, self-regulation, and resilience. I have learned to defend play with data, research, and student outcomes, ensuring that it is not dismissed as an "extra" but recognized as an evidence-based, essential approach to education (Weisberg et al., 2013). My experiences have transformed me into an educator who not only implements playfulness but actively advocates to preserve and expand its role in public schools, ensuring that every child, regardless of background, can learn, heal, and thrive through play.

My Philosophy of Learning. My teacher identity is deeply rooted in the belief that learning should be an active, joyful, and meaningful experience that supports the holistic development of every child. I do not see myself as merely an instructor who delivers knowledge; rather, I am a facilitator of learning, a guide who creates opportunities for exploration, discovery, and critical thinking. This perspective aligns with the constructivist approach, which emphasizes that children actively construct their own understanding of the world through experiences, interactions, and reflection (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In my classroom, knowledge is not transmitted but rather co-constructed through meaningful play, social collaboration, and inquiry-based learning. Playfulness is central to my educational philosophy because it fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement. Research shows that when children learn through play, they develop essential cognitive, social, and emotional skills that support long-term academic success and well-being (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Unlike traditional instructional

methods that prioritize rote memorization and passive learning, playfulness allows children to take ownership of their learning process. They become problem solvers, critical thinkers, and creative innovators, skills that are essential for success in an ever-changing world (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020).

My philosophy of learning is strongly influenced by constructivism, particularly the theories of active, experiential learning. Research emphasizes the importance of hands-on experiences in learning, suggesting that children learn best when they actively engage with their environment and construct new knowledge through exploration (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Play-based learning provides the perfect environment for this kind of active engagement, allowing children to experiment, hypothesize, and refine their understanding through trial and error. A critical aspect of this approach is the role of social interaction in learning. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights that children learn best when they are supported by more knowledgeable peers or adults who scaffold their learning experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). In my classroom, this means providing opportunities for cooperative play, dialogue, and guided exploration. Whether through dramatic play, block-building, or collaborative storytelling, children engage in rich social interactions that enhance their cognitive development and problem-solving abilities (Weisberg et al., 2013).

A constructivist play-based classroom is one where children are encouraged to ask questions, make predictions, test their ideas, and reflect on their learning. This requires an intentional and well-structured environment where materials and activities are carefully curated to provoke curiosity and deeper thinking (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). My role as a teacher is to create meaningful contexts for learning, observe children's interactions, and pose thoughtful questions that extend their thinking. For example, rather than instructing children on how to

build a bridge, I might challenge them to design a structure that can hold weight and withstand movement, prompting them to experiment with different materials and collaborate with peers to find a solution. The integration of social-emotional learning within playfulness is also a key component of my philosophy. Research indicates that play is instrumental in helping children develop emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience—skills that are foundational for both academic and personal success (Jones et al., 2019). Through role-playing, storytelling, and cooperative games, children practice communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution, all of which contribute to their ability to navigate relationships and manage emotions effectively (Jones et al., 2019; Weisberg et al., 2013).

The magic I cultivate in my classroom is intentional; it is rooted in my belief that every child deserves to feel the same joy, imagination, and possibility that I once experienced. Play is the bridge that allows me to intersect my teacher identity with my practices, ensuring that my classroom is a place where all children can flourish (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). As a teacher, researcher, and advocate, I will continue to champion the transformative power of play because I know that through it, I can create a lasting impact on the lives of my students, helping them navigate their own stories with confidence, resilience, and joy (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

The Role of Playfulness in Development

Playfulness is the spark that allows children to dream beyond their realities and build resilience to shape their futures (Masten, 2001). Parents of my students often describe my teaching practices as ‘magical’ and ‘fairytale-like,’ reflecting the sense of wonder, joy, and connection I strive to foster in my classroom. Through the power of play, I create immersive learning experiences that support relationship-building, social-emotional learning, and positive mental health and well-being (Jones & Kahn, 2020). This approach not only enhances children's

educational experiences but also reinforces their sense of self-worth and belonging (Whitebread, 2019).

Play is far more than just an activity for young children; it is the foundation of learning, development, and emotional well-being (Brown, 2018). Research has consistently shown that play fosters cognitive growth, strengthens social-emotional skills, promotes mental health, and builds critical relationships between children, peers, teachers, and families (NAEYC, 2021; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). As an educator, I have witnessed firsthand how play creates a dynamic, engaging learning environment where all children, regardless of background, ability, or emotional needs, can thrive. However, the success of playfulness depends not only on the children themselves but also on the role of the teacher in guiding, scaffolding, and advocating for play as an essential part of early education.

Through structured and unstructured play, children develop social-emotional competencies that help them navigate relationships, regulate emotions, and build resilience (Jones et al., 2019). Play provides opportunities for problem-solving, emotional expression, and self-regulation, which are particularly crucial for students who have experienced trauma or struggle with behavioral challenges. Additionally, play fosters inclusion, offering children of diverse backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles the opportunity to engage, communicate, and learn in a way that feels natural and accessible.

The impact of play extends beyond the classroom, strengthening teacher-student connections, peer relationships, and family engagement. When play pathways are created and are intentionally supported, they serve as a bridge between educators, children, and families, creating a collaborative and nurturing learning environment. In the following sections, I will explore the role of the teacher in playfulness and how play builds pathways to support social-emotional

development, mental health, inclusion, emotional regulation, and relationship-building across all aspects of early childhood education.

The data reinforced the notion that play is fundamental to cognitive, social, and emotional development in early childhood. Classroom observations and parent interviews consistently pointed to play as the medium through which children develop autonomy, problem-solving skills, and creativity (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). By engaging in dramatic play, cooperative games, and exploratory activities, students learn to navigate social structures, negotiate roles, and engage in critical thinking. A key finding was that structured play and free play serve different but complementary roles in development. While structured play allowed for guided learning experiences, free play provided children with opportunities to explore ideas, manage peer interactions, and engage in self-directed learning. My personal journal reflections highlighted how students often demonstrated higher levels of engagement and retention when play was integrated into academic content, reinforcing the idea that learning through play enhances comprehension and motivation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Social-Emotional Learning

Playfulness proved to be a powerful mechanism for social-emotional learning, supporting children's ability to regulate emotions, empathize with peers, and communicate effectively (Bandura, 1986). During classroom observations, I noted that children naturally practiced social-emotional learning skills through play, such as when negotiating turns in a game, role-playing in dramatic play, or collaboratively solving problems in building centers. The findings also emphasized that children need guidance in developing social-emotional learning competencies within play-based environments. Some students, particularly those with limited exposure to cooperative play or with social-emotional challenges, initially struggled with sharing, conflict

resolution, and understanding social cues. However, with consistent teacher modeling and gentle scaffolding, children became more adept at navigating social situations independently (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Supporting the Development of Self-Expression. The study revealed that play provides a safe space for self-expression, allowing children to explore their emotions, identities, and interests without fear of judgment. Parent interviews reinforced that children who engaged in dramatic play or open-ended creative activities demonstrated greater confidence in verbal and nonverbal communication at home. My classroom observations also highlighted that children often processed complex emotions and real-life experiences through play. For example, one child created a 'safe space' corner in dramatic play to mimic our classroom calm-down area, demonstrating an internalization of emotional regulation strategies. This finding supports previous research that play-based environments provide children with essential opportunities to work through emotions and express their thoughts in developmentally appropriate ways (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020).

Supporting the Development of Resilience. Resilience-building was a notable outcome of playfulness, particularly in problem-solving scenarios and social interactions. The findings revealed that children who experienced minor setbacks in play (e.g., blocks falling, losing a game, struggling to complete a task) learned to adapt, try new approaches, and persist despite challenges (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). My journal reflections captured moments where students verbalized resilience strategies, such as when one child said, *"I can do hard things, but I need help to do this one right."* This statement demonstrated both self-awareness and the ability to seek support, reinforcing that play serves as a low-risk environment where children can build perseverance and problem-solving skills.

Mental Health Well-Being

Findings from classroom observations and family interviews emphasized the mental health benefits of playing for both students and teachers. Play serves as a stress-relief mechanism, allowing children to process emotions, self-regulate, and experience joy. Parent feedback indicated that children who had consistent access to play opportunities exhibited lower stress levels and improved mood regulation at home.

Supporting Development of Joy and Well-Being. A significant takeaway from this study was the undeniable link between play and joy. Students consistently expressed excitement and enthusiasm during play-based activities, reinforcing the intrinsic motivation play provides. My reflections highlighted that even on challenging teaching days, engaging in playful interactions with students alleviated stress, rekindled enthusiasm for teaching, and fostered a positive classroom environment.

Supporting Students with Mental Health Needs. The study found that play was particularly beneficial for students experiencing trauma, anxiety, or emotional distress. One parent's testimony about their child creating a safe place in their home, modeled after our classroom Safe Place center, highlighted how play provided emotional security beyond the school environment. Play-based routines and calming strategies (e.g., sensory play, movement breaks) helped children regulate emotions, build coping strategies, and develop emotional resilience promoting healthy mental health coping mechanisms.

Forming of Relationships

This study highlights the central role of relationships in early childhood education, particularly within playfulness and social-emotional development. Findings reveal that strong teacher-student, peer, and teacher-family relationships foster emotional security, resilience, and

meaningful learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Play serves as a bridge for connection, collaboration, and social growth, benefiting both children and educators (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Parent interviews further emphasize that these relationships extend beyond the classroom, shaping children's confidence and well-being (Chang, 2016). The following sections explore how these connections develop through play and shared experiences, reinforcing their impact on holistic child development.

Teacher and Child Relationships. The data reinforced that strong teacher-student relationships are foundational to learning and emotional well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Classroom reflections showed that engaging in play with students allowed for deeper connections, trust-building, and opportunities for meaningful interactions. These interactions fostered a supportive environment where students felt safe to express their emotions and seek help when needed. Consequently, this approach not only enhanced their academic performance but also promoted their overall mental health and well-being.

Child-to-Child Relationships. The findings revealed that peer relationships flourished in play-based settings, with children developing social negotiation skills, learning to share, and engaging in cooperative problem-solving. Play served as a natural context for children to navigate friendships, resolve conflicts, and practice empathy. Moreover, these play-based interactions also encouraged a sense of community and belonging among students, further enhancing their social and emotional development. As a result, students were more engaged in their learning and demonstrated increased resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges.

Teacher and Family Relationships. Parent interviews confirmed that families valued play as an essential component of their child's education, particularly in supporting emotional regulation, confidence, and social skills. Through play-based communication tools such as

Seesaw updates and family engagement activities, relationships between teachers and families were strengthened, allowing for shared investment in the child's development. This collaborative approach also empowered parents to actively participate in their child's learning journey, creating a supportive network that fostered holistic growth. Consequently, the integration of playfulness and strong teacher-family relationships cultivated a nurturing environment where children could thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Joy as a Pedagogical and Developmental Force

In addition to the foundational concepts of social-emotional learning and mental health, joy emerges as an essential but often overlooked dimension of early childhood education. Bell hooks (2014) describes joy as not just simply an emotion; joy is a dynamic, relational, and embodied experience that significantly shapes how young children learn, connect, and thrive. In many ways, it operates as both a bridge and a foundation for social-emotional learning and mental well-being, offering a lens through which positive development and classroom engagement can be more deeply understood (Tobin, 2018).

According to hooks (2014), joy is central to education; it fosters curiosity, resilience, and intrinsic motivation, inviting learners to engage more meaningfully with the world around them. When children experience joy in the classroom, it enhances their ability to build relationships, regulate emotions, and express themselves creatively, which are core components of social and emotional learning (Zins et al., 2004). Joyful learning contexts can promote emotional security, reduce stress, and provide psychological relief; all are key supports for mental health and well-being in young learners (Whitebread et al., 2017).

In play-based classrooms, joy is often found in moments of discovery, collaboration, and imaginative expression. These joyful encounters support children's sense of agency and identity,

making learning more inclusive and culturally responsive (Wood, 2020). Joy, in this sense, is not separate from social-emotional learning or mental health; it is intertwined with them, reinforcing their outcomes, and helping children internalize positive coping mechanisms and social behaviors. Recognizing the role of joy honors the holistic nature of child development and supports the argument that early education must be emotionally and relationally rich to be effective and transformative.

Interpreting Findings in the Context of Existing Research

The study findings largely support existing theories on playfulness but also challenge traditional views on teacher involvement in play. While Piaget (1962) suggested that play is primarily a child-driven process, this study reveals that teacher participation and scaffolding can enhance the depth and impact of play experiences. Observational data demonstrated that teacher-led play interactions facilitated stronger emotional connections and promoted social-emotional learning skills more effectively than free play alone. This finding aligns more closely with Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of more knowledgeable others in guiding children's learning through social interactions.

Furthermore, while Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994) suggests that children's development is shaped by interactions across multiple systems, this study challenges the assumption that these influences are separate. Instead, findings indicate that classroom play experiences extend beyond the school environment, shaping children's behaviors and interactions within the home setting. Parents reported observing significant behavioral changes at home, particularly in children's ability to resolve conflicts, take turns, and express emotions more

effectively, suggesting that playfulness fosters transferrable social-emotional skills that bridge multiple ecological systems.

Challenges in Playfulness in a School Setting

Despite the growing body of research supporting play-based learning, early childhood education is increasingly influenced by policies that prioritize direct instruction, standardized testing, and rigid curricular expectations (Nicolopoulou, 2020). These approaches often contradict the principles of constructivism and child development, pushing academic skills onto children before they are developmentally ready. I reject the notion that young children should be subjected to a "one-size-fits-all" model of education that values compliance and memorization over creativity and problem-solving. Instead, I advocate for developmentally appropriate practices that honor the natural ways in which children learn and individualize for them; through play, exploration, and meaningful engagement with their environment (NAEYC, 2021).

The challenges I have faced in implementing playfulness within the school setting primarily stem from the push for a standardized curriculum, the imposition of academic standards on younger children, and the failure of many expectations to align with developmentally appropriate practices. The increasing pressure to meet state-mandated benchmarks and adhere to rigid boxed curricula. often limits the time and flexibility needed for authentic, child-centered learning. Play, foundational to young children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth, is frequently sidelined in favor of direct instruction and structured tasks that prioritize academic readiness over experiential learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Whitebread, 2019). The overemphasis on early literacy and numeracy skills, particularly in preschool and kindergarten, contradicts research demonstrating that young children learn best through hands-on, interactive experiences rather than passive instruction (Nicolopoulou, 2020).

Another significant challenge is the competitive nature of the education system, which is reinforced using standardized assessments such as FastBridge, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). These assessments, while intended to track progress and growth, often create unnecessary stress for both students and teachers and fail to capture the depth of children's learning experiences. They prioritize measurable academic outcomes over social-emotional learning and holistic development, placing children under pressure to perform rather than explore and discover (Jones et al., 2021; Oberle et al., 2020). This environment fosters a culture where learning is seen as a competition, rather than a collaborative and joyful process.

One moment that stands out in my experience was when I was required to administer the FastBridge fluency assessment to my kindergarteners. I watched as children, who were just beginning to develop their love for stories and language, became anxious over being timed while reading nonsense words. Their confidence in their abilities was diminished as they struggled to meet benchmarks that hold little relevance to authentic literacy development. I felt an overwhelming sense of resistance to placing such stress on children who should be joyfully engaging with books and storytelling. Rather than centering my instruction on preparing students for these assessments, I chose to navigate the system by integrating play-based literacy experiences into our daily routines. I have created a storytelling center where children can act out their favorite books, use puppets, and collaborate to create their narratives. I incorporate letter recognition and phonemic awareness into hands-on activities, such as treasure hunts, sensory play, and music-based learning. Instead of focusing solely on assessment results, I rely on observational notes, student work samples, and *Seesaw* portfolios to track progress in a more authentic and developmentally appropriate manner. Through this approach, I can foster a

learning environment where children develop essential literacy skills naturally, without the pressure of standardized testing and overuse of formal assessments shaping their early educational experiences. I still complete the minimum required assessments, but they are not worked up in the classroom as being important.

Despite systemic challenges, I remain committed to advocating for playfulness and authentic assessment methods. By prioritizing social-emotional learning, relationship-building, and developmentally appropriate practices, I work to create a classroom that resists the stress-inducing aspects of modern education and instead embraces the joy of discovery, creativity, and connection. My experiences reaffirm that education should be about nurturing the whole child, not just meeting assessment benchmarks, and that play remains the most powerful tool for fostering meaningful, lifelong learning.

Implications for Practice

Building on these findings, the next sections discuss the implications for educational practice in early childhood education, school leadership, policy development, teacher preparation, professional development, and advocacy of the profession. The role of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental well-being, and relationships in fostering resilience underscores the need for a holistic, child-centered approach to education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Beyond classroom practices, these insights emphasize the responsibilities of school leaders, policymakers, and teacher education programs in ensuring that play remains a core component of early learning environments (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). The following sections discuss how these findings inform best practices for educators, necessary shifts in policies and curricula, and the role of advocacy in supporting equitable, playful opportunities.

What These Findings Mean for Early Childhood Education

This study expands existing knowledge by highlighting the dynamic relationship between teacher identity and playfulness. While prior research has explored the benefits of play for children's cognitive and social development, fewer studies have examined how an educator's personal and professional experiences influence play facilitation (Williams, 2021). The findings suggest that teachers who actively engage in play with children, rather than simply facilitating activities, create stronger social-emotional connections and foster deeper learning experiences (Brown & Vaughn, 2020). These findings contribute to the growing body of research that emphasizes the role of teacher engagement in supporting mental health and well-being (Rogers, 2021). Additionally, this study underscores the importance of play as an intervention for social-emotional development and mental health support, both for the teacher and child. Parent interviews (2025) revealed that children who struggled with anxiety, self-regulation, or peer interactions benefited significantly from structured play experiences, reinforcing the idea that playfulness is not just an academic tool but also a therapeutic mechanism for emotional well-being. These findings support previous research indicating that play can serve as an early intervention strategy for children with social or emotional challenges (Bethell et al., 2019; Denham et al., 2019).

Supporting Holistic Development

This study reaffirms that children learn best in environments that support their cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development simultaneously (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Playfulness provides opportunities for problem-solving, collaboration, and emotional regulation, all of which contribute to holistic development (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Findings from parent interviews and classroom observations demonstrated that children used play as a tool

for self-expression and emotional processing. Additionally, students engaged in dramatic and cooperative play experiences that strengthened peer relationships and encouraged empathy, reinforcing social-emotional learning skills (Bandura, 1986). To fully support holistic development, schools must prioritize play not just as an instructional tool but as a fundamental right of childhood, integrating it into daily routines rather than treating it as an isolated activity. By ensuring that children have access to play experiences throughout the school day, educators can foster self-confidence, independence, and problem-solving abilities that extend beyond the classroom.

Transferability of Findings Beyond Early Childhood Education

While this study is grounded in early childhood education, many of its findings are transferable to other educational settings. The emphasis on teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, relationships, and joy is relevant across grade levels, particularly in environments that seek to support holistic development. Educators in elementary, middle, and even secondary settings can benefit from adopting a relational, reflective, and developmentally responsive stance. For example, integrating playful learning strategies, fostering authentic teacher-student relationships, and embedding social-emotional practices into daily instruction can enhance engagement and resilience across age groups. As Palmer (2007) notes, good teaching emerges from the identity and integrity of the teacher, a concept that holds true regardless of the age group being served. The advocacy strategies outlined in this study, such as collecting classroom data, aligning practices with developmental theory, and using teacher voice, can also empower educators in all settings to push for systemic changes that prioritize playful learning.

Implications for School Leaders and Stakeholders

School administrators and stakeholders must recognize that playfulness is not simply a method of engagement but a research-supported approach to fostering long-term academic and emotional success (NAEYC, 2020). Findings from this study, as reflected in the perspectives of a few participating parents, and my own experiences, revealed that students exhibited greater focus, problem-solving abilities, and emotional resilience in classrooms where play was intentionally incorporated. However, institutional barriers, such as academic standards, high-stakes testing, and administrative resistance to non-traditional teaching methods, often limit teachers' ability to implement play-based approaches (Miller, 2020). To support teachers, school leaders must integrate play into the school-wide curriculum, invest in professional development, and ensure that assessments account for diverse learning experiences. For instance, in this study, parents expressed appreciation for a play-based approach, with one noting that "Every day was a playful exchange of knowledge" (Parent interview, personal communication, 2025). This highlights that families value and recognize the developmental benefits of play, reinforcing the need for school leaders to align policies with evidence-based, child-centered practices.

Recommendations for Shifts in Practice and Policy Changes. This study calls for a shift in early childhood education policies to better align with developmentally appropriate practices. Current educational structures often prioritize academic outcomes at the expense of play, exploration, and social-emotional learning, despite research demonstrating that playfulness enhances cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Ginsburg, 2007). One key recommendation is embedding play into learning standards to ensure that state and national educational policies explicitly integrate playfulness into curriculum frameworks (NAEYC, 2020).

Additionally, there is a need to reduce overemphasis on standardized testing, as high-stakes assessments often pressure schools to replace play-based instruction with rigid academic methods (Miller, 2020). Instead, alternative observation-based assessments, like anecdotal records and portfolios, should be implemented to better capture children's holistic development. School districts should consider implementing curricula that support the use of playfulness. Lastly, policymakers must advocate for equitable access to play-based learning, particularly in under-resourced schools, by ensuring funding for quality play environments, outdoor play areas, and social-emotional learning programs aimed at increasing achievement outcomes.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development. Findings from this study emphasize that educators must receive targeted training in using playfulness within their teaching practices of social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being supports, and relationship-building approaches, to create effective and nurturing classrooms. However, many teachers enter the profession without formal preparation in these areas, leading to inconsistencies in implementation (Ginsburg, 2007). To address this gap, teacher education programs should integrate comprehensive coursework and practical experiences focused on teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being supports, and relationship-building. Ongoing professional development opportunities are also essential to support teachers in mastering these skills and fostering positive classroom environments.

Teacher Preparation Programs. Teacher preparation programs should emphasize play theory, social-emotional learning training, and developmental psychology to ensure educators understand how play fosters cognitive and emotional growth (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Additionally, integrating reflexivity into teacher training can help educators examine how their own identities and experiences intersect with their teaching practices (Chang, 2016). By

incorporating these elements, teacher preparation programs can better equip educators to create supportive and engaging learning environments that promote the holistic development of their students. By incorporating self-reflection and identity work, teachers can become more intentional in creating inclusive, playful environments. Identity work allows educators to understand their own biases, values, and experiences that shape their teaching approach. By engaging in self-reflection, teachers can develop greater empathy and cultural sensitivity, which are crucial for meeting the diverse needs of their students. This intentionality in understanding oneself enhances the ability to create inclusive and supportive learning environments, ultimately leading to more effective education (Chang, 2016).

Professional Development. For in-service teachers, professional development should provide hands-on training in playful approaches, allowing educators to observe, implement, and refine play approaches through peer collaboration, coaching, and classroom-based projects (Miller & Almon, 2009). This approach not only fosters a deeper connection between teachers and students but also encourages a more dynamic and responsive educational environment. In-service teachers need explicit instruction on how the different areas of child development are supported by playfulness and how to integrate learning standards into this type of learning environment. By continuously reflecting and adapting, teachers can better support the diverse learning needs of their students, leading to improved academic and social outcomes (Murphy et al., 2021).

Advocacy for Playfulness. This study shows the need for greater advocacy to ensure play remains a central component of early childhood education. Teachers, researchers, and policymakers must work together to combat misconceptions about play and push for child-centered, relationship-driven learning environments. Raising awareness about the developmental

benefits of play among educators, families, and policymakers is essential to shifting public perceptions and educational priorities (NAEYC, 2020). Advocacy efforts should focus on empowering teachers as advocates, encouraging them to speak out about the benefits of playfulness and participate in policy discussions. Collaboration with organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and childhood advocacy groups can further push for play-based policies that support holistic development (Ginsburg, 2007). By ensuring that play remains a fundamental part of early education, stakeholders can work toward creating more equitable, developmentally appropriate learning environments that prioritize joy, exploration, and social-emotional growth.

The implications of this study point to a necessary shift in early childhood education back toward a more developmentally appropriate, play-based, and relationship-driven model. Schools, policymakers, and educators must work together to ensure play is prioritized, social-emotional learning is fully integrated, and teachers are equipped with the knowledge and support needed to foster holistic child development. Teachers must embrace their own identity and use it within their practices in a reflexive manner to bring authentic and playful learning into their practices. By implementing these findings into practice, policy, and teacher education, early childhood education can continue to evolve into an environment where learning is joyful, meaningful, and rooted in strong relationships

Challenges and Limitations of Study

Researcher Bias in Autoethnography

The main challenge of autoethnographic research is the potential for researcher bias due to the dual role of the researcher as both participant and analyst (Chang, 2016). Traditional qualitative or quantitative research provides a level of objectivity and external validation,

whereas autoethnography is inherently subjective, reflective, and narrative-driven (Ellis et al., 2011). My personal experiences, beliefs, and emotions shaped the interpretation of findings, creating the risk of selective storytelling or unintentional confirmation bias (Adams et al., 2017). Throughout this study, I used memo writing, reflexivity, and thematic coding to mitigate bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than personal assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Triangulation of data sources also strengthened the credibility of findings by cross-referencing multiple perspectives and experiences (Denzin, 2012). Despite these measures, the study's highly personal nature means that interpretations are inevitably influenced by my bias, lived experiences, and professional background. This is especially true with my strong philosophy of the use of playfulness.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study was deliberately focused on the experiences of my specific early childhood classroom settings, which presents both strengths and limitations. While autoethnography allows for a deeply reflective, experience-driven exploration of educational practices, it does not seek to generalize findings to all early childhood educators, schools, or students (Chang, 2016). Additionally, the study's reliance on personal narratives, memory work, classroom observations, and parent interviews means that findings are context-specific and shaped by the unique dynamics of this classroom environment. While patterns and themes emerged that align with broader research on teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional learning, mental health and well-being, and relationships, the study does not include quantitative measures or comparative analysis that would allow for broader generalization (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Despite these limitations, the study offers a unique contribution to early childhood education research by centering the lived experiences of an educator. The study highlighted the complex interplay between teacher identity, playfulness, social and emotional development, mental health and well-being, and relationship-building. The findings provide a foundation for further inquiry into how teachers' personal histories and professional experiences, both of which affect their t*eacher identity* and educational philosophies, shape their approach to *playfulness, social-emotional development, mental health and well-being,* and *relationships.*

Implications for Future Research

As an educator and researcher, the findings from this study have inspired me to consider how I can expand upon this work in future research. While this study provided rich insights into the role of teacher identity, playfulness, social-emotional development, mental health and well-being, and relationships in my kindergarten classroom, there are many opportunities to deepen and broaden this research. Specifically, I aim to explore how playfulness and teacher identity manifest in different educational contexts, examine the long-term impacts of playfulness on children's social-emotional and cognitive development, and investigate how play supports teacher satisfaction in the field.

Expanding the Study to Different Educational Contexts

One key limitation of this study is that it focuses on a single teacher's classroom in a Title 1 public school. While this setting provided valuable insights into how playfulness supports social-emotional learning, mental health, and relationship-building, it would be beneficial to extend this research to other educational environments. In future studies, I plan to explore how playfulness is implemented in diverse contexts, such as special education classrooms. Throughout this study, I observed how students with diverse needs, including those with sensory

processing disorder, autism, conduct disorders, oppositional defiance disorder, and ADHD, benefited from play as a regulatory and relationship-building tool. Further research could examine how play supports children with different learning needs in both inclusive and specialized environments and how educators can be better equipped to adapt playfulness for neurodiverse students (Vygotsky, 1978). I have some prior research on students with oppositional defiance disorder diagnosis and I am curious on how I could use this study to grow my knowledge of the topic further. Investigating this environment would allow me to compare the challenges and opportunities that educators face when integrating playfulness and identify best practices that can be adapted across different settings (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Additionally, as an adjunct instructor working with preservice teachers, I am particularly interested in studying how teacher preparation programs influence educators' willingness and ability to implement playfulness Many new teachers enter the field without formal training in play pedagogy and may struggle with balancing developmentally appropriate practices and academic expectations (Ginsburg, 2007). Conducting research with preservice teachers in early childhood education programs could provide insights into how teacher identity is shaped during training and what supports are necessary to ensure that play remains a core element of their instructional practices (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). However, I am aware that many researchers are also exploring this topic of interest, and I would need a clearer understanding of the existing studies to identify gaps for further inquiry.

Investigating Long-Term Impacts of Playfulness

This study provided a snapshot of how play impacts children's learning and social-emotional development in a single school year, however, I am eager to explore the long-term effects of play-based education. One possible research direction is to follow a cohort of students

over multiple years to assess how early experiences with playfulness in my classroom shape their academic achievement, emotional regulation, and social skills in later grades. During the parent interviews, the participants all expressed noticeable differences in engagement and growth from my play-based classroom in other grades with more traditional educational practices. Research suggests that children who engage in high-quality play during early childhood exhibit stronger executive functioning, problem-solving abilities, and resilience in later years (Ginsburg, 2007; Smith & Pellegrini, 2020). Conducting a longitudinal study within my school setting could provide deeper insights into whether play-based approaches continue to benefit students as they transition into more structured academic environments. I do have a strong opportunity to complete research such as this, as I remain very close with the cohort of families and students who have grown alongside my daughter as she ages.

As an adjunct instructor, I also have the opportunity to collaborate with early childhood educators and mentor new teachers. A future research project could involve action research within multiple classrooms, studying how teachers develop confidence in play-based teaching and what support they need to sustain these practices. By working with early career teachers, I could explore how professional development, mentorship, and reflection shape their use of playfulness and what barriers exist in maintaining these approaches within different school cultures (NAEYC, 2020).

Investigating Play as a Means of Teacher Retention

Finally, I would like to investigate how playfulness affects teacher well-being. Throughout this study, I found that engaging in playful interactions with students reduced stress and reinforced my enthusiasm for teaching; it is almost healing for me. I believe it to be a key aspect of why I have been able to continue teaching in the classroom with such longevity I have

had. Future research could examine how incorporating play into teaching practice supports teacher mental health, prevents burnout, and enhances job satisfaction. This could be particularly relevant for early childhood educators, who often experience high levels of stress due to the demands of teaching young children and secondary trauma (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Final Thoughts

Overall, this study strengthens the theoretical foundation for understanding how teacher identity supports the application of playfulness by demonstrating its impact on social-emotional growth, mental health and well-being, teacher-student relationships, and holistic development. Findings support the importance of teacher identity in shaping effective play environments and emphasize the transformative role of play in emotional regulation and relationship-building. Additionally, the study provides new insights into how playfulness can serve as an intervention for social-emotional challenges, reinforcing its value as a fundamental component of early childhood education.

These findings have critical implications for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers, advocating for greater integration of structured, teacher-supported play experiences in early childhood classrooms. Future research should continue exploring the longitudinal impacts of playfulness and teacher engagement, further advancing our understanding of how play shapes children's development across multiple ecological systems. Play, which often coincides with joy in the classroom, is not only beneficial for children’s development but also serves as a stress relief for me as a teacher. In the structured demands of lesson planning, assessments, and administrative responsibilities, moments of play offer a reset, a chance to be fully present, to engage with my students, and to share in their joy. When I step into the dramatic

play center, build alongside them in the block area, or join in a silly movement game, I find myself laughing, problem-solving, and experiencing the same creative freedom that I aim to cultivate in them. These moments remind me why I chose this profession, allowing me to reconnect with the magic of childhood learning and step away, even briefly, from the pressures of rigid educational expectations. Research on teacher well-being suggests that engagement in playfulness environments can reduce burnout and enhance job satisfaction (Smith & Pellegrini, 2020), and I have found this to be true in my own practice. By embracing play as a shared experience, I not only support my students' social-emotional development but also create a classroom culture where joy, curiosity, and human connection thrive, for both my students and me.

This dissertation has been a journey of self-discovery, growth, and resilience. It has challenged me in ways I never anticipated, forcing me to navigate the complexities of academic writing, confront my insecurities, and examine my teaching through both a personal and scholarly lens. The dissertation process has also affirmed my role in the field of early childhood education, reminding me that my work has value, meaning, and a lasting impact. I began this process feeling like an outsider in academia, struggling to find my voice in the world of research and scholarship. As I conclude this journey, I recognize that my voice holds value and deserves to be heard within the academic discourse. My work, both in the classroom and in teacher education, has shaped the lives of hundreds of children and future educators. This dissertation has given me the confidence to embrace my teacher identity as both a practitioner and a researcher, knowing that my experiences and insights contribute meaningfully to the field of early childhood education. I know that staying in education is not really about ‘remembering your why’ as it is often said but is more about intentionally creating and cultivating joy.

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Appendix A: Family Questionnaire

Family Questionnaire

In an effort to ensure that the quality of my classroom and instruction is effective, I like to survey parents in a way that allows me to reflect in and adjust my instruction each year. Please take a moment to complete this survey and return in the attached envelope.

Each of the following topics relates to key areas of quality early childhood professional practice as outlined by the Council for Professional Recognition and National Association for the Education of Young Children.

For each area, please rate the Candidate on a scale of 1 – 3
1 = Needs improvement/Area for professional growth
2 = Capable/Competent
3 = Very capable/Area of strength.

The Teacher:

1. Provides a safe, clean environment for my child and teaches her/him how to stay safe

1 2 3

2. Provides an environment that promotes health and good nutrition

1 2 3

3. Provides activities, materials and schedules that promote my child's development and education

1 2 3

4. Uses activities, materials and equipment that allow my child to develop small muscle skills (like writing or pouring) and large muscle skills (like climbing or balancing)

1 2 3

5. Uses activities, materials and equipment that help my child learn how to think, reason, and solve problems

1 2 3

6. Helps my child learn how to communicate and introduces her/him to the basics of reading and writing

1 2 3

7. Helps my child express herself/himself creatively through music, art, and movement

1 2 3

8. Nurtures my child, helping her/him build a positive self-identity and respect for every child's cultural backgrounds

1 2 3

9. Helps my child learn how to socialize and get along with others

1 2 3

10. Uses effective strategies to help my child understand how to behave appropriately

1 2 3

11. Establishes positive, responsive, and cooperative relationships with me and the members of our family

1 2 3

12. Is well-organized and effectively manages the classroom or group

1 2 3

13. Presents herself/himself in a professional manner

1 2 3

Name (optional)

_____

Comments:

Appendix B: Parent Interview

The following questions will be asked in the interviews, recorded for reliability and validity using the application otterly.ai. Otter.ai is an AI-powered transcription service that helps convert spoken language into written text. It is designed to record, transcribe, and share conversations, such as meetings, interviews, lectures, and presentations, making it popular for notetaking, productivity, and accessibility purposes (Otter.ai, n.d.).

Preface:

"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As we begin, I'd like to focus our conversation specifically on your children's experiences in my classroom. Your reflections on this time are crucial in helping me understand the impact of play-based learning on their development, particularly in building relationships, social-emotional skills, and mental well-being. I want to assure you that everything you share will remain confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy. Your honest thoughts and observations will greatly improve future students' educational practices. Let us reflect on those moments and insights that stood out to you during that period."

Background and Experiences:

- Can you describe your family's experience in my classroom?
- Can you describe your family's experience with play-based learning in the classroom?
- How have your children responded to play-based activities? Have you noticed any changes in their behavior or learning?

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):

- What changes or improvements did you see in this area during your child's time in my classroom?
- In what ways do you think play-based learning has contributed to your child's social-emotional development?
- Have you observed any improvements in your child's ability to regulate emotions or interact with others due to play-based learning?

Mental Health and Well-Being:

- How has play-based learning impacted your child's mental health and overall well-being?
- Have there been any specific instances where you felt play-based activities helped your child cope with stress or anxiety?

Parental Involvement:

- How have you been involved in your child's play-based learning experiences?
- What role should parents play in supporting play-based learning and SEL at home?

Feedback and Suggestions:

- Do you have any suggestions for how play-based learning could be improved or better integrated into the curriculum?
- Can you share your favorite memory from your children's time in my classroom? Why does it stand out to you?
- Are there any specific areas of your child's development you would like further supported through play-based learning?

- Are there any other areas of feedback you would like to offer about your time in my classroom?

Closing Statement:

"Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights with me today. Your reflections on your children's time in my classroom are incredibly valuable for this study. Your input will help me understand how play-based learning and social-emotional development practices influence children's growth and well-being. Please feel free to reach out if you have any further thoughts after our conversation. I appreciate your time and contributions to this important work."

Appendix C: Internal Review Board Study Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: December 18, 2024 **IRB#:** 17964

Principal Investigator: Tabitha Christie

Approval Date: 12/17/2024

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Playful Practices and Personal Reflections: An Autoethnographic Study of Early Childhood Education

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix D: Consent to Participate

Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research about explore how play-based learning and teacher identity influence social-emotional development, mental health, and relational dynamics in early childhood education. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how a teacher's personal experiences, cultural background, and professional beliefs impact their implementation of play-based learning and their relationships with children and families. By examining these elements, the research aims to provide insights into the role of play-based education in fostering positive social-emotional outcomes and supporting holistic child development within the context of teacher-student-family interactions.

If you agree to participate, you will participate in one interview, lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. This interview will explore perspectives on play-based learning, observed social-emotional development in your child, and your family's relationship with the teacher in the past time your child was enrolled in the course. With permission, these interviews **may** be audio-recorded to ensure accurate data collection.

You may experience these minimal <u>risks by participating in this research</u>:

There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made could become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure network for five years, and at that point it will be destroyed.

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All data collected will be securely stored and identifying information will be removed to ensure anonymity in any reports or publications. Your involvement in this research will help contribute valuable insights into play-based learning and social-emotional development in early childhood education.

We will not share your data or use it in future research.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree for data records to include identifiable information? ___Yes ___ No

Do you agree to be quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___
Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___ No

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:
Principal Investigator: Tabitha Christie, PhD Candidate
Early Childhood Education Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum
University of Oklahoma
Phone: (405) 618-0089
Email: Tabitha.k.christie-1@ou.edu
And/or
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Erin Casey, Associate Professor
Early Childhood Education Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum
University of Oklahoma
820 Van Vleet Oval, Office 125
Norman, OK 73019
Phone: (405) 325-1498
Email: ecasey@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

I agree to participate in this research.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent Date

Appendix E: Thematic Coding Framework

The following Thematic codes are to be utilized in this study:

1. **Teacher Identity (TI):** Codes related to personal beliefs, professional roles, and cultural background.
2. **Playfulness (Play):** Codes focused on implementing play in education, playful behaviors, benefits observed, and challenges faced.
3. **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** Codes that capture emotional regulation, empathy, and problem-solving as observed in the classroom.
4. **Mental Health and Well-Being (MH):** Codes related to the impact of play on stress relief, regulation, emotional expression, and overall mental health.
5. **Relationships (R):** Codes regarding interactions between teachers, students, and families and how these relationships are nurtured through play or playful behaviors.

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Final Report – Inactivation

Date: July 16, 2025

To: Tabitha Christie

IRB#: 17964

Study Title: Playful Practices and Personal Reflections: An Autoethnographic Study of Early Childhood Education

Inactivation Date: 07/16/2025

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the Final Report for the above-referenced research study. You have indicated that this study has been completed and should be inactivated. This letter is to confirm that the IRB has inactivated this research study as of the date indicated above.

Note that this action completely terminates all aspects and arms of this research study. Should you wish to reactivate this study, you will need to submit a new IRB application.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board