CONDITIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ USE
OF PLAY IN TWO BELIZEAN CLASSROOMS

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by
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the conditions that benefit and hinder preschool education and preschool teacher’s knowledge of and use of play in early education within the culture of Belize, using case studies of two preschool teachers. Studies show that positive attitudes toward play in the preschool classroom are more likely to be adopted by preschool teachers who have received training and education in play pedagogy (Johnson, Sevimli-Celik, & Al-Mansour, 2013; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Quinones & Ridgway, 2015). These case studies present a cultural perspective of early childhood education and the use of play among two preschool teachers in Belize. Teachers were selected from preschools in a rural and urban setting in Belize. No significant differences in teaching philosophy and practice related to this study were found between the rural and urban sites. The methods of this study included collecting observations, interviews and artifacts from the study participants.

As yet, a qualitative study of play pedagogy of preschool teachers in Belize has not been conducted. This study addressed the need to highlight culture in understanding the dynamic early educational experiences of young children in diverse communities. Names of all study participants and locations have been changed to protect identities. As preschool teachers, their lived experiences reflect on the early childhood teaching profession, and their daily triumphs and challenges. Each preschool teacher’s unique case illustrated how they understand and enact play pedagogy. The case studies reflected the understanding of each preschool teacher in regard to play and their approaches to play pedagogy and the constraints and affordances that facilitated or prevented desired practices. Teachers reflected a desire to gain more knowledge and training in the field of play pedagogy. Teachers also desired greater access to play based learning materials as resources were limited in their classrooms. Collecting their stories provided an illustrative lens of the practical experiences of those involved in the cultural setting of Belize.
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my daughters, Mariana Alyssa and Mía Isabella. May you be inspired by all that was sacrificed and accomplished with you, always, in mind. May you find the strength to move mountains and may you always believe in your abilities to achieve the impossible dreams.

To those that suffer from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder:
Despite all I have been through, despite having to say, #MeToo, I am a testament that it is never too late to believe in your power to overcome life’s tragedies.
Channel your pain into your life’s work, make it all worth it, find your reason, hold fast to it and never stop fighting.
CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Global human rights organizations and educational agencies have heeded the call to maximize human capital at the earliest stages of life (Trube, 2015). The United Nations, UNICEF, and the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) have partnered with countries worldwide to maximize the potential of investing in early care and education for young children (Government of Belize, 2017; The World Bank, 2017; Trube, 2015). Research on the critical period of brain growth in the first three to five years of life continues to shed light on the importance of early stimulation (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). As world nations take notice of this research, early childhood education (ECE) has received special attention as an area for greater return on investment (Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016; Hart & Risely, 1995). Early childhood is now a sector of education that continues to expand and improve in countries all over the world.

As efforts to expand early childhood educational services take shape, many nations have been faced with similar challenges in recruitment and retention of qualified ECE teachers and ensuring program effectiveness. Teachers trained and educated in early childhood methods are essential to functional ECE programs. Policy makers are also concerned with crafting early learning standards and curricula to define quality measures and implement sound ECE programs (ACEI, 2011; Stegelin, Cicconi, & Pintus, 2015). As countries grapple with these issues, it is evident that a balance between defined goals and expected outcomes weigh greatly against observed practices and realistic expectations. Carefully crafted policy documents may aim to
produce high performance outcomes, but an ECE program is only as strong as the teachers who implement instruction. Policy makers may also require teachers to implement practices that are not in line with effective early childhood outcomes. A program that focuses too heavily on direct instruction will fail to provide adequate time for open-framework practices of child-directed activities and free, unstructured play. Programs for young children are most effective when they are developmentally and culturally appropriate to the needs and contexts surrounding the learner (Hyun, 1998; Tobin, Karasawa, & Hsueh, 2009). As more nations work towards expansion of early education there is a need to evaluate progress towards implementing effective practices to ensure best outcomes for young children.

Early childhood educational research shows that children benefit from learning environments that foster play and exploration (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Feeney, Moravcik, & Nolte, 2016; Gordon & Browne, 2015). Yet these benefits are only made possible by providing young children with the space, time and materials to engage in active play. Furthermore, educators must understand the value of play to accommodate for time, space and materials (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2015). Early childhood teachers must receive adequate education, training, resources and practice to successfully incorporate play into their classrooms.

Recent studies suggest that while many teachers report their belief that play is beneficial to development, learning, and well-being, they often do not have the knowledge base, experience or materials necessary to include beneficial play (i.e. educational play) in their classrooms (Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Quinones & Ridgway, 2015). This poses a problem for young children who miss out on the benefit of play based activities during their early school years. In this respect, the quality of early educational experiences can suffer due to the lack of knowledge,
training and skills on the part of the early childhood teacher. These matters can become very apparent and acute when explored in the context of cultural diversity.

Teacher training, program quality, and efficient ECE practices are current areas of focus for the education sector of government in Belize. Currently, the Ministry of Education is working to improve teacher education and expand preschool access to more of the nation’s young children (Ministry of Education - Belize, 2011; Government of Belize, 2017). This has not been a seamless process, as many of the outlined goals of educational reform efforts for early childhood have gone unmet and teachers are beginning to express frustrations with current policies. In September 2016, the Belize National Teacher’s Union (BNTU) organized an eleven-day strike for all teachers to pressure lawmakers to continue funding a special committee working on behalf of Belizean teachers’ interests (San Pedro Sun, 2017). The BNTU sought to keep the special committee in government to support teachers’ requests for better pay and additional supports and resources (San Pedro Sun, 2017). Though the strike ended, this event signified areas of concern for the teaching staff in Belize. The present study offers an investigation of Belize’s early childhood educational system and progress toward expansion and quality through case studies of Belizean preschool teachers.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the conditions of preschool teachers in Belize as they prepare children for school and how they view use and understand play as a factor in cognitive and socio-emotional development of young children in Belize. An evaluation of the constraints and affordances of the teachers’ experiences working at the early childhood level within Belize’s current educational system is described according to the case studies. Currently, studies have not yet been conducted examining the ways that culture and teachers’ educational attainment influence
the use of play in Belizean preschools. This study aimed to highlight attitudes, beliefs, and prior experiences to play-based education of select preschool teachers in Belize. This study also aimed to describe how preschool teachers enact play based education within a climate of accountability.

A secondary purpose of this research was to discuss the influence of government expectations on early educators in Belize regarding the Action Plan of 2011-2016, put forth by the Ministry of Education. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory, the government’s effort to expand early childhood education using numerous factors to achieve specific outcomes was labeled as a macrosystem influence. The residual effects of the macrosystem influences on preschool teachers’ instructional design and classroom practices were identified as the microsystem influence. Each system of influence was discussed in terms of the overall implications to developmental outcomes of the preschool children in each case study. The goals for early childhood education outlined in the Action Plan 2011-2016 was used as a point of discussion to provide an update on the ways that the preschools in each case study have lived up to the government’s expectations. Each case study served as a progress report on meeting the goals put forth by the Ministry of Education.

**Background**

The location of this study is Belize, Central America. Belize presents a unique cultural site for educational research as the only English-speaking country in Central America. The education system in Belize closely resembles British education due to its history as a British colony. Since achieving independence in 1981, Belize remains a member of the British commonwealth of nations. Educational policies in Great Britain continue to influence Belize’s educational reform efforts. The early education system has followed a similar pattern of first expansion of services and later revisions for quality control. Beginning in the 1980s Belize has established several action
plans in response to calls for improvement of Belizean education services (Bennett, 2008). Belize has been increasing development of its ECE institutions, programs, and infrastructures over the last decade.

Belize’s Ministry of Education is the section of government “charged with the responsibility of ensuring that all Belizeans are given the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for full and active participation in the development of the nation” (Ministry of Education - Belize, 2012, p. 20). The early childhood division of the Ministry is run by the Quality Assurance and Development Services (QADS) department. This division of the Ministry conducts program evaluations, creates, and distributes the preschool curriculum, and publishes progress reports on early childhood education (Ministry of Education: QADS, 2005).

The most current action plan was established for the academic years of 2011-2016. This plan concluded in 2016 with many areas still in the emerging stages of progress. The early childhood education section of the action plan called for several areas of improvement. One of many goals for early childhood education reform was to increase access to education for young Belizean children by expanding the number preschools nationwide. However, an increase in preschools requires an increase in preschool teachers. The Ministry sought to expand the preschool workforce while also improving early childhood quality. Therefore, an added goal was to train and certify more early educators to serve the nation’s preschoolers (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2012).

This portion of the action plan is still in progress. Currently, Belize is still seeking to increase the preschool education workforce while accounting for the demand for well-trained and knowledgeable faculty (Ministry of Education - Belize, 2012). In response to this growing need, Belizean institutions of higher learner have added certificate and associate’s degree programs in
early childhood education to campus locations nationwide (Cayetano, 2016). In the meantime, Belizean preschool children are still enrolled and attending schools with teachers that display varying levels of knowledge and skills to encourage their healthy growth and development. Unskilled teachers pose a greater risk of creating learning environments that are unfavorable or unstimulating, putting young children at risk of being underprepared for the start of formal schooling (Boyd, 2013).

Although it is reasonable for the Ministry of Education to place greater expectations on early childhood teacher, there is also a concern of whether the teachers receive adequate support beyond teacher education programs. What is unknown is the constraints placed on teachers in a climate of accountability with few resources provided to encourage positive results. How are Belizean preschool teachers performing under the goals and expectations of the Ministry’s action plan? What are the current conditions of teaching in Belizean preschools and how are preschool teachers accounting for the expectations placed on them to improve early childhood education in Belize? This study provides two cases with descriptions and explanations and examples of preschool teachers’ practices, understandings, and conceptualizations of core concepts, such as children’s play, early childhood education within the context of Belize.

Participants selected for this study were preschool teachers in two distinct communities in Belize. Mr. Cortés taught in a rural, small community preschool attached to the local primary school. This male teacher was not fully certified in early childhood at the time of the study. The teacher worked as a primary grades teacher for two years before being appointed as an early childhood teacher. In accordance with initiatives to increase ECE program quality by the Ministry of Education, Mr. Cortés was in the process of receiving an ECE certificate at the university satellite campus in the neighboring city of Orange Walk.
Ms. Tuk was a preschool teacher in an urban community setting. This female teacher taught preschool for twelve years and obtained an early childhood education degree from the local university. The stand-alone preschool site served working-class families in the surrounding community. Ms. Tuk taught the level two preschool children, those who would graduate from preschool and move on to primary school the following year.

**Significance of the Study**

In modern educational systems such as the United States, Great Britain and Australia early childhood educators must be trained in curricular methods that encourage growth and development in young children. Play based methods are encouraged as “a vehicle for children to learn and to develop” (Chang, 2001, p. 277). Teachers who wish to work in early educational settings that follow developmentally appropriate practices must learn to embrace young children’s play. Even so, many new teachers emerge from teacher preparation programs with little understanding of the effective approaches to play pedagogy (Quinones & Ridgway, 2015; Wood, 2014).

In Belize, guidelines such as developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) have not been adopted for early childhood education (Berson & Berson, 2016). DAP provides a framework for early childhood educators that includes areas such as knowledge of child development, differentiating for individual differences, planning for learning and development, using assessment for planning and working closely with families. Cultural sensitivity is also mentioned in DAP which is important when applying outside frameworks to a specific culture. Belize also lacks early childhood standards for educators to follow (August, 2012). Without a framework such as DAP and early learning standards, Belizean early childhood educators may not be aware of the most effective practices available in teaching, planning for, and guiding young children.
This study used culturally relevant theories and frameworks in examining and discussing preschool education in Belize. I found a developmentally and culturally appropriate practice framework especially useful in interpreting the study data and illuminating the general research problem under consideration in this dissertation. The early childhood division of the Ministry of Education put forth a national curriculum to be used by preschools nationwide and is currently working on establishing a list of early childhood standards for educational outcomes. Assessment booklets to track the students’ progress are also distributed by the Ministry. Adopting guidelines like DAP may prove beneficial to Belizean early childhood educators in need of assistance in areas such as selecting appropriate teaching, guidance, and assessment strategies for young learners. DAP provides a useful framework for establishing such guidelines; but the unique cultural setting of Belize should inform this undertaking, such as in any revision before further implementation. Research such as the present study should be helpful in this endeavor.

Hyun (1998) devised the developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (DCAP) framework to address the specific needs of a diverse early childhood classroom. Early childhood teachers must be taught to become culturally sensitive when dealing with children and families. In some cases, children living in culturally diverse settings have different needs than children in advanced societies. Their teachers must respond to these needs in ways that do not always match the established educational framework of advanced societies. The goals and expectations of these teachers must match the abilities of their students. Often, the tools and materials available greatly limit the teacher’s ability to challenge the students and/or teach effectively. In addition, the skills and training of the teachers can also reveal the limitations of teaching in areas with limited resources.
Another concern is that many preschool teachers have not completed education or training to teach at the early childhood level. At time of this study less than 5% of preschool teachers in Belize were certified to teach early childhood education (Cayetano, 2016); and a goal was established to increase this number to 25% by 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2012). The problem posed when preschool teachers are not trained and certified is that they will not have the adequate skills and knowledge in areas such as child development, child guidance and beneficial practices such as educational play to enrich young students. The focus of this study was to gain insight on two preschool teachers’ experiences of teaching at the early childhood level in Belize through interviews and systematic observations. Typically, teachers can only perform effectively with the appropriate level of supports in the form of resources and training. This study examined the levels of support the participants experienced and compared the information obtained to observations of their practice.

Belize’s decades long efforts at early childhood expansion provide a unique context where preschool teacher training and practice can be studied and understood as culturally specific. Currently, there are few current studies available of preschool education in Belize. There are no studies of play in preschool education in Belize thus far. This study adds to the availability of research inquiry on Belizean preschool education. In addition, the culturally specific context of Belize makes a study of the early educational setting and practice of Belizean teachers a useful contribution to the literature. While many studies exist on the state of preschool education in specific cultures around the world, there are few studies available on early education and practice in Belize. Currently, only one research study examined the conditions of preschool classrooms and teacher effectiveness in Belize (August, 2012). August (2012) conducted a study using the early childhood environmental rating scale (ECERS), adapted to the Belizean contextual environment,
to evaluate Belizean preschools. August found that many preschools have significant changes to make to improve in areas such as planning, teacher interactions and warmth, and infrastructural concerns. This study recognizes and contributes to the gaps in the literature on preschool education in Central America and the Caribbean.

The study data were generated from the accounts of those directly involved in preparing young children for school – preschool teachers. Methods consisted of informal and formal interviews, participant observations and field notes, and photographs. The methods informed this study’s undertaking of qualitative inquiry. This study explored what teachers value, discuss, demonstrate, and understand as important in teaching young children in Belize. The study also explored the teacher’s concerns both reported and observable. The study participants’ knowledge and training in the field were analyzed as well as their ability to make preschool learning playful or fun for Belizean children.

**Theoretical Framework**

Three theories inform this study. First, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) begins the theoretical analysis with an explanation of sociocultural processes, where language and meaning are socially constructed. Next, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological systems theory (EST) informs the study using the nested systems of social interaction to explain the many spheres of influence that affect the teachers’ daily teaching practices. Finally, Rogoff’s three planes theory (TPL) of sociocultural development explains the role of interactions between the teachers and their students as tools to impart cultural knowledge. Study data in the form of observations and vignettes, field notes and photographs served as evidence of the cultural nature of the study participants’ preschool classrooms.
Cultural and societal ideologies can shape outcomes within a specific context, such as education. The recent push for educational reform and expansion of early childhood education has provided the opportunity for an increase in early childhood educational centers within the nation of Belize. The Ministry of Education has taken this focus and formulated a plan of action to begin meeting the educational needs of its youngest citizens. In addition, the Ministry’s attention on early childhood has garnered more interest in promoting the awareness of the importance of early education to the population through media sources and word of mouth, thus influencing social shifts on a macro level. Francis Fonseca, former Minister of Education in Belize explained:

The opportunity for these children to develop their own life skills at this early age, for them to develop the right values, the right attitudes toward learning I think is very, very critical. And so, we are very, very committed at the Ministry of Education to early childhood education and development (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2)

Fonseca’s comments reflect the government’s desire to see education effect change for its citizens even at the earliest level. The key phrases used include “life skills,” “right values,” and “right attitudes toward learning” all of which reflect a set of ideals that represent some of the government’s goals for early childhood education.

On the micro level, preschool education in Belize is becoming more of a specialized field, with the Ministry’s push for more trained and certified teachers and greater enrollment and attendance of preschool children. Belizean teachers who wish to teach at the preschool level are now tasked with obtaining the proper endorsements to work with children at the emerging educational level. ECE teachers must now enroll in higher learning institutions that offer an associate’s degree or a certificate program in ECE (Cayetano, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2012).

In addition, the teacher must also assimilate what the government explains are core values and educational learning goals that they must meet as they teach the children in preschool. This knowledge, paired with their understanding and use of the national curriculum, as well as the
feedback they receive from yearly program evaluations, form their understanding of the macro level, governmental expectations of school readiness for their students. The teachers must successfully merge all these concepts related to teaching, learning and school readiness in young children if they are to successfully prepare their students for primary school in their communities within the cultural context of Belizean education. These competing notions in the teachers’ minds, in addition to their own teaching philosophies, are reflected upon as they explain their views of school readiness and educational play in the interviews presented in this study.

The early learning experience of the Belizean preschool child is driven by multiple cultural systems using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. The multiple systems approach touted by Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes the interactions between those that influence a child within each system as well as the interactions across each system. In this light, it is not simply the child’s home or school that is most influential to their educational outcome, in this case, but it is also the interactions between parents and teachers as well as the outer influences of the community to the parent, the principal to the teacher, the Ministry officials to the principal and the government to the Ministry, among many others.

Following Bronfenbrenner’s explanation of each system, the microsystem represents the most immediate circle surrounding the child that directly impacts his or her daily experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Belizean preschool child will develop and learn through interactions with parents and siblings as well as extended family and neighbors. The child will also likely interact with preschool and Sunday school teachers, if they are in attendance of school and church. While religion is a more present staple in Belizean cultural systems, preschool attendance is also beginning to make an impact on early developmental experiences of Belizean children due to the direction of the government through the Ministry of Education, at the macro level.
The macrosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, represents ideals at the societal level that influence each lower system and ultimately the developing child. The Ministry of Education of Belize has laid forth expectations of early childhood educators to become trained to meet the educational needs of Belize’s young children to prepare them for primary school. Belize’s recognition of the importance of well-trained staff show that it is a priority for individuals who seek to teach preschool age children to be educated in how to do so effectively. In addition, the Ministry has put forth a curriculum to be used in all preschools in Belize. This curriculum guide is an example of Belize’s commitment to ensure young preschool children receive adequate instruction that will lay the foundation for subsequent education.

Finally, the government, led by the Ministry of Education, has created an annual campaign aimed at spreading awareness nationally on the importance of early childhood education. Coined the, “Early Childhood Stimulation Month,” the event takes place during the entire month of March and includes festivities, parades, dances, skits, and other activities put forth by the children, teachers, and parents of the local preschools throughout the districts of Belize. These influences on early childhood education in Belize come from the government at the Macro level, which make their way down to the Micro level, within each school community.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory also assists in framing this study by providing a viewpoint on the cultural aspects of language and learning within the Belizean early educational settings used in this study. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory purports that language and meaning are socially constructed. The preschool teachers in this study describe their notions of play and school readiness from their own acquired knowledge of each concept within the educational boundaries of teacher training. As such, each teacher has provided examples of cultural notions of school readiness and the use of play in their classroom within the context of the Belizean educational
system. In addition, Vygotsky’s notion of scaffolding within children’s play also illuminates teacher’s roles during play. Preschool teachers in this study explained their understanding and use of the many roles teachers can assume as students engage in play. Vygotsky saw play as a potential scaffold for a child’s learning yet also explains the importance of social interaction from a knowledgeable teacher or peer. An explanation of teacher roles during play that were observed in this study is assisted by Vygotsky’s theory of play.

**Research Questions**

As previously outlined, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, and Rogoff’s three planes theory helped to contextualize the current research of how preschool teachers in Belize use, understand and enact play as part of their school readiness practices. The following research questions were generated as a result that allowed for enriched parsing of the data:

**Question 1.** How does a Belizean preschool teacher 1) describe and 2) enact the use of play in their classroom?

**Question 2.** What are the positive early childhood practices currently in place in a Belizean preschool? What affords them and facilitates them?

**Question 3.** What are the compromised early childhood practices in a Belizean preschool? What external constraints are present that contribute to the compromised practices?

**Significance of Research Questions**

In the field of early childhood education there is a pressing need for increasing educators’ knowledge, awareness, and strategies for incorporating play that supports children’s learning and development (Almon, 2013). Teachers are more likely to use play-based teaching methods if they are educated in the developmental benefits of play. Awareness, understanding, and application
strategies are key to implementing play-based instruction (Johnson, Sevimli-Celik, & Al-Mansour, 2013; Ridgway & Quinones, 2012; Quinones & Ridgway, 2015). In addition, culturally appropriate practices in teaching are required of a diverse community such as Belize. Teachers can learn practices that are deemed appropriate in Western educational literature and learn to adapt it to the cultural context of their own classrooms, to make learning culturally appropriate for their students (Hyun, 1998).

This is no different in diverse cultural communities such as Belize, a developing nation that patterns its educational system upon Great Britain and the United States. The government’s expectations for early childhood expansion and improvement trickle down to influence the early educator’s ability to perform their daily instruction. This study highlights how two preschool teachers explain their understanding of the role of play in early education and the macro influences on the micro contexts of their daily classrooms. The Ministry of Education’s action plan does not mention specific areas in which they wish early childhood teachers would become more skilled and educated. Instead, the Ministry asks for early childhood teachers to receive diplomas and certificates in early childhood education. There is no mention of the need for knowledge of play uses and practices. Examinations of these teacher’s experiences teaching in Belizean preschools illustrate how teacher training in early childhood education in Belize aids in teacher effectiveness and instructional practices.

Semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, observations and researcher notes, and photographs of the study sites and participants served as the primary sources of data for the study. The methods used to conduct this study were relevant to the research questions and appropriate for the cultural context of the site and setting. I employed the insider’s view (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999) as a Belizean-American that assisted with the understanding of Belize’s
educational system. I also applied an outsider’s view as an educator formally trained in the United States to apply a critical lens to the practices and conditions observed in the preschools.

I utilized Belize as an example of a cultural setting that is following the lead of Western early childhood educational practices to formulate their current early educational reforms. The questions posed in this study asked how preschool teachers currently describe and demonstrate their knowledge of play in early childhood education, what are the conditions preschool teachers work in and what are the benefits and challenges to teaching in preschools in Belize. This study aimed to produce results that would supplement the existing literature on improvements to play pedagogical methods in teacher preparation programs in Belize. In addition, this study offered suggestions on the usefulness of teacher training on various types of play to early childhood classrooms in developing nations such as Belize.

Glossary of Key Terms

**Culture:** a set of beliefs, norms, and practices that unify a group of people

**Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP):** NAEYC’s framework of best practices in early childhood education centered on knowledge of a) young children’s development and learning, b) individual children’s development and learning, and c) children’s social and cultural contexts

**Developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (DCAP):** Teaching practices that are cognizant, appreciative, and aligned with a culturally appropriate purpose in mind to be responsive and inclusive of diversity and cultural differences

**Dramatic play:** Play that is generated and structured by children with a storyline, props, players, and a generalized theme

**Fantasy play:** Play that involves children pretending or recreating stories they have made up, either done individually or in a group, with or without props
**Functional play:** Play that is repetitious, basic in its function, mainly involving the continuous repeating of a child’s acquired abilities for practice and enjoyment

**Group play:** Play that involves participation of two or more children

**Play perceptions:** teachers’ knowledge and notions of play and the usefulness and/or significance of play in preparing young children for primary school

**Study Outline**

This study is framed first by presenting the background literature on school readiness and a historical background on schooling in Belize in Chapter Two. The study’s methodology and research methods are presented in Chapter Three. Presentation of data follows in Chapter Four with a look at the first case study in Corozal, Belize. Chapter Five presents the second case study in Belmopan, Belize. An analysis of the data presented is encompassed in Chapter Five. Final comments and discussion on the study’s findings are presented in Chapter Six.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents background literature relevant to this research. Topics covered in this chapter include: (1) a history of education in Belize, (2) preschool education in Belize, (3) teacher preparation in Belize, and (4) the role of play in ECE, 5) teacher roles in children’s play in ECE, and 6) theories of development. Finally, an explanation of the purpose of case studies on preschools in Belize as a contributing factor to the discourse on the expansion of ECE in Belize is provided.

Belize: Cultural Context

I chose to examine early childhood education and educator practices in the unique cultural site of Belize, Central America, keeping in mind the ways that culture can influence early schooling practices. Belize is the only nation in Central America whose official language is English although it is a multiethnic society.

Belize shares its history and traditions as a former British colony with the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean. Belize features many resources that provide the backdrop for a rich cultural and historical study for Belizean children growing up in the nation. From the untouched jungles and rainforests in the West, the swamps and mangroves in the South, the world’s second largest barrier reef in the East, to the ancient Mayan ruins throughout, there is so much for Belizean students to see and learn right in their own backyards. Even so, the current educational system in Belize needs some vast improvements. The country’s representative parliamentary government
has designated the Ministry of Education to serve as the nation’s main “educational authority” (UNESCO – IBE, 2006).

Belize is a sparsely populated country represented by many cultures and languages. Ethnically, Belize is a diverse nation which consists of Creoles (descendants of African slaves and White colonizers), Mestizos (descendants of Native Americans and Spanish colonizers, East Indians, Mayas, Garifuna (a mix of Caribs and African descendants), and other smaller populations of settlers including Chinese and Lebanese merchants (CIA Factbook, 2016). Most official business and educational instruction is conducted in English. There are, however, several other languages spoken by most of the population including: Spanish, Garifuna, Maya (Q’eqchi’, Mopan, and Yucatec), and the vernacular, Belizean Creole (or Bileez Kriol), a dialect of English (Crooks, 1997).

While several of these languages may be spoken in the home or within the community, most Belizeans mainly converse in Kriol. What is interesting to note is that while many ethnic groups exist, and many other spoken languages persist, the cultural environment in Belize is one of a unifying belief of being a “Belizean.” A common phrase that describes this notion is “Alla we da Belizean,” or “We are all Belizean.” Even so, for many years there has been a culturally disseminated rule that Kriol is not a true language and therefore should not be used in conducting official business or in classroom instruction. Instead, citizens should learn to conduct business in Standard English. It was also common for educated mothers to discourage their children from speaking Kriol with school friends even outside of school (Ravindranath, 2009). Speaking English was most associated with educational attainment and sophistication. Most Belizeans considered it proper etiquette to address foreigners in English and children are encouraged to learn to code-switch (Bauer & Gort, 2012) when addressing teachers or other respected adults.
In recent years there has been a shift in attitudes toward the use and recognition of Creole as a language. Although it is still not recognized as an official language, more Belizeans are beginning to see it as a real language, and many are beginning to take pride in being bilingual and/or “bidialectical” (Anderson et al., 2012). The National Kriol Council of Belize was established to promote the recognition of Creole as a legitimate language and to develop a dictionary for speakers to begin writing in the language using a standard dictionary. There is little information on whether this movement is creating a rising level of acceptance of Kriol in settings such as schools.

The growing interest in the Kriol language is likened to a show of nationalistic pride in response to the growing number of Spanish-speaking immigrants from neighboring Hispanic countries in Belize and the emigration of Belizean citizens to the U.S. and Great Britain resulting in a diminishing population of Creole-speaking citizens and a growing number of Spanish-speakers in the country (Ravindranath, 2009). As children grow up in Belizean homes, their exposure to Kriol stands out as the first real language that they learn and speak. Even without a formal recognition of Belizean Kriol as a language, children who grow up speaking mainly Kriol are deemed native and fluent speakers of the dialect, and it may even be seen as their first language.

Standard English is mainly used at the onset of formal schooling, and there is little information on the transition of Belizean children to formal schooling regarding language use. More has been written about the difficulties in school transition for children whose native language is not English or Kriol, such as in the Maya, Garinagu, and Mestizo communities. These groups speak Q'eqchi’, Mopan or Yucatec Maya, Garifuna, and Spanish, respectively. The children of these communities often experience much greater difficulties in the transition to formal schooling in Belize, given that English is the language of instruction throughout the country.
For young Belizean children, the exposure to Kriol and English songs, rhymes, and games assists them in developing their bidialectical understanding of both languages. Even without exposure to British nursery rhymes in English, young children are still getting a tremendous amount of early language practice by participating in games and songs in Kriol. Children that are regularly engaged by caregivers using these types of songs and rhymes are receiving the same kind of early exposure to rich and complex language use as the children attending family literacy programs in the United States. What's more, these emergent literacy practices are specific to the culture of Belize and are not appropriated from a dominant culture and imposed upon minority children, as is often the case with the experiences of African American and Latino children in the United States. Children in Belize are exposed to early learning experiences that are consistent with the language, history, and culture of Belize that makes these practices culturally congruent. When these children go on to school, they experience a cultural consistency in seeing the history and culture reflected in their studies.

Although the Belizean school system has a mostly British influence due to the nation’s history as a former colony, the early exposure to nursery rhymes and songs in English in the preschool years serves as further cultural congruency for Belizean children (Cook, 2012). One main drawback in the argument of cultural congruency of schooling for Belizean children is the strict use of Standard English in schools as the primary language of instruction. Kriol can be used as a transitioning step to acquiring English in the early grades. Also, using books and folk stories in Kriol in schools can be a way of introducing children to cultural studies and history within the curriculum.

Examples of emergent literacy concepts gained through participation in games, rhymes, and songs include rhyming words, repetition, alliteration, and vocabulary. Rhyming words are easy
for children to remember and follow along when sung. Hearing and recognizing words that rhyme is important phonological awareness skills and allow children to guess what word might come next in a story read aloud. These skills are important to children who are becoming independent readers. Repetition is common among the songs, nursery rhymes and even folk tales. This element of literacy is important for use with young children. Repetition allows children to become familiar with songs or stories faster and increases their use of expressive language (Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

**Education in Belize: A History**

The development of Belize’s education system began long before the country became a recognized nation. The establishment of the current centralized school system began during the period of Belizean history as a former British colony. Belize was known as British Honduras then and the earliest schools were established through local churches. The earliest school on record was a primary school, the Honduras Free School, established in 1816 (Bennett, 2008).

Interestingly, the earliest schools were established at the behest of the British Crown, to ensure that, “ignorance should not be permitted to perpetuate itself; that if through ignorance the negroes of the present generation are insensible to the blessings of education, they are not therefore to refuse them onto their off-springs” (Bennett, 2008, p. 3). It was a priority that upon emancipation the slaves of the colony would be provided with schooling to ensure an educated and productive citizenry. This was due to the population of the colony seeing slaves outnumber settlers at a rate of three to one.

**Funding.** Funding for early schools was limited to resources allocated to the development of the colony and private donations. Churches provided the infrastructure and staffing for Belize’s early schools as well. These early schools laid the foundation for an interwoven system of the
religious affiliation between churches and schools. This established the “church-state partnership” that is a persistent element of Belizean education. As Bennett (2008) notes:

The establishment of the church-state system of educational control and administration in Belize was not an accident nor was it unique to Belize. Rather, it was part of the British policy to place education in the hands of the churches. (p. 3)

In terms of administration, the government established the Board of Education in 1892 to oversee the efficiency of the colony’s earliest schools. One of the more prominent influences that this early administration set forth was the adoption of corporal punishment in schools. The authoritarian method of child guidance was approved and upheld in the colony’s educational practices well beyond nationhood. This practice permitted teachers and administrators to physically punish students for misbehavior, a disciplinary method further exacerbated by teachers’ lack of formalized training in child development and social-emotional health.

The initial priority of the colony in establishing a system of schooling was to provide primary education to citizens, followed by secondary education and technical/trade schooling. University and preschool education were among the latest reform efforts to provide a comprehensive education to Belizeans.

**Reform.** The initial efforts at implementing systematized education were followed by reforms in 1850 and 1855. The 1850 School Act was adopted with the purpose of creating new schools throughout the region and to enforce regulations of schools. The subsequent Act of 1855 saw the members of the Board of Education increase from five to seven, a call to provide more qualified teacher from Britain and to establish an infant school.

Evaluations led by B.H. Easter in 1934 highlighted problems that ultimately arose in the functioning of the colony’s education system. This report, entitled, “An Enquiry into the Educational System of British Honduras 1933-1934” highlighted a number of concerns. Of
primary importance was his argument that the church affiliation was impeding the progress of building a better educational foundation for Belizean students. He pointed to the reliance on missionaries in place of trained citizens to fill teaching positions in a country they were still becoming acquainted with. He noted that facilities provided by churches were sufficient to ensure a continued reliance on them in the future. He also found that salaries were insufficient in attracting future trained workers, such as overseas teachers, to the colony for work. These findings were the earliest indication that reforms were grossly needed to shape the future of education in British Honduras.

These early efforts at reform led to meaningful changes that benefitted students. Still, there was more work to be done. By 1915, primary school was still not mandatory. The number of trained teachers had increased but was not commensurate with the demand for more schools due to population increases. Additionally, primary school costs remained a concern. Most school by then required parents to cover the cost of school fees such as tuition, uniforms, books, and other supplies. As a result, enrollment and attendance lagged at an average rate of 50%. By 1920, legislation was amended to enforce compulsory schooling from age six until age fourteen in cities and towns, and age twelve in rural villages.

Reforms continued to arise in response to social issues. In the 1930s reform was implemented to address the issue of language barriers. English was established as the primary language of instruction, with Spanish recognized as a language in need of support. The vernacular of Kriol was mentioned as a concern among pupils and teachers but dismissed. School reform during this decade also saw a response to the global economic downturn with a decrease in school fees and teacher salaries at the same time as a call for the establishment of a teacher-training program.
For the greater part of the twentieth century British ruling officials influenced the colony’s education system. British aid continued to provide support for opening an increasing number of schools and providing access to trained teachers for the purposes of staffing schools and teacher training programs. School visits continued to shed light on the country’s need for improvements in education. By the 1950s the political climate reflected the increasing turmoil of a colony of citizens seeking independence from Britain. The members of the advisory council for education sought avenues to decrease dependency on Britain in the education system. The colony sought outside assistance to begin shaping a new path. Organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF would begin to play a role in creating social services in support of families and partnering with the government to expand educational services.

Curriculum. In the 1960s and 1970s the colony began making strides toward gaining independence. The partnership with UNESCO saw opportunities to participate in reform efforts across the Commonwealth Caribbean. The organization created the UNESCO Educational Planning Mission in collaboration with the Ministry of Education to improve educational services. An improvement plan was set forth under the Seven Year Development Plan (1964-1970). Early childhood education was one sector that began to take focus. The Curriculum Development Unit was established as a government effort to begin evaluating content taught nationwide with the goal of creating a centralized curriculum. The grade levels of Infant I through Standard IV were established as the primary grades and a benchmark exam, The Belize National Selection Exam, was set forth as the exit exam for primary and checkpoint for determining entrance to secondary schooling.

Beginning in the 1960s Belize began to gain stronger influence in curriculum development from nations such as the United States, Great Britain, and other Commonwealth Nations. These
nations served as exemplary models to shape the nation’s emerging curricula. Pertinent subject areas were established based on what these nations taught as well as considerations for the needs of Belize’s citizens.

Efforts in the latter half of the twentieth century leading into the nation’s independence from Britain in 1981 focused on improving existing services. Schools were still firmly established among churches, but government funding and regulations increased. The facilities were schools were housed also required improvements. Teachers continued to struggle with receiving adequate training, particularly in complex subject areas such as mathematics and the sciences. The Belize Teacher’s College and the Belize Technical College provided the supports for teachers to become trained but regularly needed evaluation and improvements as well.

In the years following independence the burgeoning nation saw increased need for further educational expansion and reforms. Two sectors that required immediate attention were early childhood education and special education. Also, higher education was becoming a concern with an increasing number of citizens receiving secondary education certificates and requiring continuing education. Most students that graduated from secondary education were required to obtain scholarships to attend university abroad. The University of Belize was incorporated to begin addressing the demand for higher education among citizens and employers alike.

**Belizean Early Childhood Education**

Early Childhood education in Belize began with the establishment of “infant schools” for young children aged five and above in accordance with the Schools Amendment Act of 1855. This Act identified the need for classrooms that would accommodate children at the nursery school level. From there, kindergarten classrooms were included in primary schooling as an introductory
grade called Infant I. Even so, it would be several decades before the focus of educational expansion included early childhood.

In partnership with UNICEF, the Ministry of Education created the Preschool Unit in 1979. The purpose of the Preschool Unit was to plan and establish preschool centers, increase opportunities for training, and provide salaries to potential preschool educators. At that point, a few government-run preschool centers were in operation. Challenges that emerged from the implementation of the earliest preschools in Belize included the lack of adequate facilities to operate preschools at the optimal level and the reliance on “unqualified, untrained women” to staff the preschool centers (Bennett, 2008, p. 121).

Quality. At the same time, evaluations of Belize’s education system began to focus on improving the quality of schools and teachers. The desire to improve education quality began with increasing standards of teaching effectiveness for the primary and secondary levels. A caveat of this shift in focus from implementation to improved quality meant that similar goals were adopted for preschool education at its onset.

In the 1980s there was increased interest in opening new preschool centers in Belize. According to Bennett (2008), “By 1983, pre-school enrolment was about 1900 children in centres staffed by some 112 pre-school teachers. Of the pre-school centers seven were operated by Government, 15 by community boards and 36 were operated by private owners” (p. 135). Between 1979 and 1989, UNICEF provided provisions for the continued expansion of preschool centers that saw an increase from the initial 25 centers to 75 centers nationwide. Centers continued to increase in number, commensurate with enrollments, serving children aged three to four years old.
**Teacher training.** Teacher training for preschool educators was provided through the Preschool Unit in conjunction with Peace Corps Volunteers. According to Bennett (2008), the content covered in preschool education training included:

- Child development and behavior
- Pre-school education, methodology and techniques
- Mobilizing parent involvement in pre-school education
- Developing teaching/learning materials (p. 137)

Certificates were awarded to preschool teachers who completed two six-week training sessions in their subject area. The Belize Teacher’s College also began offering a program of study in early childhood education during the 1990s. This program was implemented to train early education teachers at the primary school level, who would be teaching Infant I and II. A formalized program of study for preschool educators was not yet available during the latter decade of the twentieth century.

Preschool teachers in Belize had to meet the challenge of teaching in classrooms with limited supplies, materials and supports, such as teacher’s aides. They received just enough training to lead their classrooms but were overburdened by disproportionate ratios of students to each teacher. Also, the Preschool Unit established the preschool curriculum that set forth the subjects and content covered in the preschool years (Bennett, 2008).

**Curriculum.** The Preschool Unit compiled the preschool curriculum for Belize in the 1990s. All preschools in Belize were required to utilize the curriculum creating a uniform system of preschool education throughout the country. The curriculum manual was divided into two parts. The level one curriculum was written to outline learning goals for three-year-old children enrolled in preschool. The level two curriculum featured learning goals and outcomes for four-year-old children. All preschools used the first edition of the preschool curricula for several years before it was revised.
The first edition contained drawbacks that presented challenges to preschool teachers. The curriculum contained all required subject matter to be covered in the preschool years. The subjects were not clearly defined or presented in a logical, organized format, such as in units, to assist preschool teachers in designing lesson plans. Teachers were expected to plan activities that covered the required content but were not coached in how to sequence learning activities to align with learning goals and outcomes. While all preschools were in accordance with utilizing the same curriculum, it was possible for each preschool to cover differing content and instruction on the same day. The lack of an organized schedule made for the lack of consistency among preschools. The subject areas of the early curriculum manuals were cause for concern. Some content was later evaluated for its appropriateness at the preschool level.

Finally, preschool teachers were not trained in how to use the preschool curriculum at its inception. The teachers were tasked to discern how and when to instruct students, where to find resources to teach lessons and how to ensure learning goals were being met. Without adequate training, many preschool teachers struggled with how best to utilize the curriculum manuals (Bennett, 2008).

**Constraints.** The Ministry of Education Preschool Unit published a document in 1992 outlining the chief concerns for the progress of preschool education in Belize. In the section titled, “Problems and Constraints” the government outlines its recognition of these problems paired with the promise to improve access to preschool. Realistically, the issues raised in the document attributed the source to a lack of adequate, sustained funding for preschools in Belize. A call for increasing funding to the preschools spoke to the challenges preschool teachers reported in providing quality early education to students with limited resources. This document recognizes these concerns but responds with the following statement (Bennett, 2008):
It is unlikely that in the next decade government will be in a position to significantly increase its financial allocation to this education sub-sector to meet the ever increasing demands for preschool education. As a consequence, private and community resources will have to continue to play a substantial role in supporting the operations of pre-school programmes. Efforts need also to be made to secure external resources. (p. 138)

It is important that the government recognized the concerns that preschool teachers posed in response to the constraints experienced in their profession. It is widely reflected in this response that the primary concern of the government was not allocated to preschool education at the time of the publication. Primary and Secondary education was of utmost importance as was increasing access to higher education during the 1990s. It would be at least another decade before the government recognized the importance of investing in early childhood educational expansion.

**Preschool Today**

Preschool education in Belize has since gained greater importance. In keeping with the history of educational reforms the Ministry of Education followed the lead of leading nations such as Great Britain and the United States in recognizing the early years as critical to development and school success. The nation’s preschools are either government-run, government-aided, or private. Preschools that are church-run are typically private, with all funding, maintenance and operations conducted by the organization. Some privately-run schools may also receive limited funding allocated for teacher salaries from the government. These school would be deemed government-aided. Government run schools are owned, funded, and operated by solely by the government.

The number of preschool centers increased in 2004 to 2014 from 118 to 222. The number of preschool teachers increased during that period from 256 in 2004 to 455 in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014). The steady increase in the number of centers and teachers shows a growing interest in preschool education in society. This can be attributed to the government’s efforts at encouraging citizens to invest in education early. In Belizean households, most families have the
benefit of support from extended family to provide childcare. Parents that work outside the home do not generally need to rely on center-based care for their pre-primary children. In this respect is not by necessity that parents choose to enroll their children in preschool but by the knowledge of the important of early childhood education. The Ministry of Education has worked to provide more facilities and trained teachers to improve access to preschools while it spread the message to the general public that the early years are an investment in the future of the nation’s children. Many families have responded with increased enrollment of their preschool aged children in community schools.

Teacher education programs and certifications have become more prominent for those that wish to teach at the early childhood level. Previously, a small number of programs were offered to train and certify teachers in early childhood education. The limited availability and logistical constraints of these programs contributed to the low number of certified preschool teachers. Recently, programs offered by the University of Belize have been established in the northern districts of Belize, Corozal, and Orange Walk, to train and certify teachers in early childhood education. This program shows promise in helping to meet the Ministry of Education’s goal to increase the number of trained and certified preschool teachers (Cayetano, 2016).

**Current Educational Reform**

Belizean schooling has undergone several waves of reform. As the changing needs of the citizenry pair with the changing scope of society, the nation has been tasked to meet these demands for better-trained workers. As a profession, education has been no different. Increasingly, the old methods of primary school educated teachers are no longer seen as effective. Current reform is geared toward seeing more professionally trained teachers leading primary and secondary school classrooms. This is also true of Belize’s emerging ECE sector.
The Action Plan of 2005-2011 reflected the Ministry of Education’s previous effort to improve educational services for Belizean students and teachers. The action plan sought to reform many sectors of education including Primary, Secondary, Higher Education and Preschool. Provisions for special education were also discussed. The plan outlined the following goals for all sectors of education:

- Universal access to primary school by 2008
- Universal Secondary Education by 2010.
- 75% trained teachers by 2010.
- Average class size of 25 by 2010.
- Repetition and Dropout rates below 5% at all levels by 2010.
- 100% Preschool coverage by 2012.
- National Examination performance averages over 75% in Math, Science, and English by 2010.
- 100% increase in tertiary level enrollment by 2012.
- 100% secondary school graduate competency in Spanish as a second language by 2010

(Ministry of Education, 2004)

For preschool, the focus for improvements were to increase training and certification for preschool teachers, increase the number of preschool classrooms and increase enrollments. School attendance at the preschool level remained a concern, but was not explicitly addressed since preschool is not mandatory.

Currently, Belize’s educational system is experiencing changes in response to the Ministry of Education’s most recent action plan with goals outlined in the 2011-2016 Action Plan that reflected a continuation of the previous document. Among the chief concerns of this latest educational reform effort were: (1) a focus on expanding early childhood education, (2) advancement in teacher training and professional development, (3) strengthening special education services, (4) increasing adult and continuing education across the country, and (5) curriculum & instructional design considerations. This plan of action also showed a major effort by the
government to address the changing demographics of the developing nation to make the schooling of Belizean children more culturally relevant and globally current (UNESCO & Ministry of Belize, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, I researched the Ministry of Education’s efforts to improve early childhood education. In previous decades early childhood education did not receive as much focus as in the current reform efforts. According to the Education Act of 1990 (amended in 2000) schooling before the age of 5 was not mandatory and compulsory schooling of Belizean children began from age 5-14 for the primary school grades. Preschool centers in Belize serve children ages 3-5. The population of preschool-aged children in Belize has increased steadily over the past decade. The 2010 census showed 15,376 children of preschool age. The projected number of preschool aged children for the 2016/2017 school year was increased to approximately 17,500 to reflect population trends based on census data. The Ministry of Education outlined plans to increase the number of preschools to serve the growing population of preschool-aged children in the 2011 Action Plan (UNESCO & Ministry of Belize, 2011).

Before the 2011 Action Plan, there were around 90 preschools in 1994 throughout the entire nation. During the 2011/2012 school year there were 209 preschools and a total of 7,116 students were enrolled in preschool in Belize. The goals of the Action Plan 2011-2016 (UNESCO & Ministry of Belize, 2011) for preschool education were to:

- Increase the number of preschools to 2,600
- Increase preschool enrollment to 50% of preschool aged children
- Train/certify approx. 50% of the preschool teacher staff
- Establish supervision and quality assessments of preschools (p. 22)

Since the previous Action Plan of 2005-2010, the latest figures in the expansion of preschool in Belize show promising results. The number of preschools in Belize has risen steadily since 2005. The number of preschool teachers has also increased in the same time period from 256
in 2004/2005 to 455 in 2014/2015. These figures provide evidence that the efforts of the Ministry of Education to increase availability of preschool classrooms across the country and to increase preschool staff have been successful. In addition, preschool enrollment in Belize has shown a yearly increase as well. In 2004 preschool enrollment was 6,739 students nationwide. By 2014 that number had risen to 7,505, reflecting an increase in the number of enrolled preschool students in 2014, compared to ten years before (Ministry of Education, 2014). While these figures show promising implications in continuing to expand preschool education in Belize, the remaining goals by the Ministry to increase the number of trained and certified staff, continue to increase preschool attendance and to design and implement an early childhood curriculum still require attention (Ministry of Education, 2012).

To reduce costs, it was proposed to attach preschools to existing primary schools throughout the nation that in order to increase the availability of preschool classrooms. Availability and training of teachers was also a primary concern as there were 256 preschool teachers in 2004/2005 with only 7% trained and/or certified (UNESCO – IBE, 2006). Government-issued early learning standards were not yet established and a method of supervising and assessing for quality was not yet planned (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Some barriers and limitations to the expansion of preschool education in Belize can be seen in the funding of preschools and the ability to train preschool staff. Belize’s education system’s funding is largely a partnership between church and state or public and private funding. Most schools in Belize from preschool to higher education are religiously affiliated. Funding of preschools is largely privately sourced with some funding allocated by the government. During the 2004/2005 school year, government preschool funding was $237 BZD ($118.50 USD) per pupil. The remainder of the costs was community funded and privately funded. Access to teacher
training is also limited in Belize. The quality of teacher educators trained and certified in early childhood education at the Belize Teacher’s College is a concern. Outside training from other nations provides an additional resource for training and certifying preschool teachers. The teachers selected for this study received varying levels of training in ECE. Teacher A was obtaining a certificate in ECE while Teacher B had received a degree in ECE from the university. Each case presented unique data on the teacher’s abilities making for nuanced discussion.

In addition, limited resources and high teacher/student ratios are among the chief concerns associated with teaching in Belizian preschools. These issues were investigated in the study sites to provide evidence of the constraints of teaching in Belizian preschools. The Ministry of Education suggests that the student/teacher ratio for preschool in Belize is 16:1 (UNESCO & Ministry of Education, 2011). It is unclear whether preschools are adhering to this policy especially with increased public interest in preschool enrollment and limited sites to serve local communities. According to NAEYC guidelines of DAP, student teacher ratios for preschool should be limited to 10:1 for a group size of 20 children (NAEYC, 2013). Though the Ministry’s proposed ratio reflects the limits of Belizian education services and is likely culturally appropriate, the number of young children preschool teachers are expected to guide is concerning. These concerns echo the conditions found in a study of preschool in Bangladesh by researchers Chowdhury and Rivalland (2011), where limited infrastructure and overcrowding of classrooms were shown to diminish preschool quality.

An area not immediately addressed in the action plan was the use of corporal punishment in schools. Belize had a long history of using corporal punishment as a method of classroom management in primary and secondary levels. Physical punishment was also a common practice in childrearing, culturally. In the last two decades of the twentieth century critics of corporal
punishment began speaking out against its practice. These included educators, parents, and even top government officials. Belize’s Prime Minister Said Musa stated in 1990:

For too long the approach to education in our schools has been authoritarian. The teachers have traditionally been the fountain of all wisdom, knowledge and understanding. The student did not dare to disagree. The call to democratize education and the policy to nurture inquisitiveness, discovery, dialogue, and debate must grow in our schools. This is how we will build confidence and promote new and creative leadership in the future. This is how our children and our people will be motivated to become an active, enlightened citizenry imbued with national consciousness and positive attitudes. (as cited in Bennett, 2008, p. 133)

Musa directly addresses the consistent practice of using authoritarian guidance in leading students. This teaching style is proven to be ineffective and even harmful to the developing child. Additionally, he states that the philosophy of education in Belize requires a shift as well. The notion that teachers are the only sources of knowledge is brought into question. Musa desires a new approach in which students are encouraged to ask questions, grow intellectually and socially, and develop confidence. In doing so, he believes that these new perspectives will open different avenues of leadership for the nation through its youngest citizens.

Even so, it would be more than two decades later before Belize formally abolished corporal punishment in schools. In September 2011, Minister of Education Patrick Faber announced that corporal punishment was to be removed from all schools indefinitely. This was a significant event in shaping the future of child development and guidance for the next generations. To support this transition, the ministry offered teachers training in classroom management and conflict resolution to ensure that they were better equipped in guiding students without resorting to physical punishment.

In the preschools teachers also require continual support in classroom management. Challenging behaviors can be daunting for even experienced teachers. The preschool is still one of the more emerging sectors of Belize’s education system. There is a continued effort to increase
knowledge, skills, and training of preschool teachers. Positive guidance is the more widely accepted method of management in early learning environments. This practice is difficult to maintain, particularly when dealing with challenging behaviors, unless there is embedded support provided to the teacher. Belize continues to improve its efforts at providing such support to preschool teachers, but there is still work to be done.

**Teaching Preschoolers in Belize**

ECE in the English-speaking Caribbean has seen a recent focus on expansion and quality from national governments seeking to prepare their youngest citizens for a proper education and social mobility. In Belize, the focus on developing early childhood education to serve Belizean preschoolers began in the early 1990s, “after the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the government of Belize moved to improve early childhood education” (August, 2010, p. 19).

Research also shows there is an expressed focus on academics in Caribbean early childhood curricular goals often with less focus on the child’s socio-emotional well-being. Families are fully aware of the importance of education for social mobility. Many educational systems in Caribbean nations such as Jamaica and Belize follow a selective process of educational attainment where satisfactory scores on completion exams are used to determine entrance to subsequent schooling. In this system, exit exams in primary school are used to determine which secondary schools’ children can attend, and similar exams at the end of secondary school determine access to technical schools or universities (De Lisle, Smith, Keller, & Jules, 2012). This high-stakes testing environment serves to encourage an academic focus in early schooling where academic skills are impressed early on, and issues of self-esteem and social-emotional development are not emphasized in the school environment.
Historically, schools in the Caribbean have embraced the practice of corporal punishment and allowed teachers to use such means as classroom behavioral management. Schools and societies that practice corporal punishment of children portray a value system where the adults are at the center and the children are expected to maintain obedience and respect for their elders. This high level of expectations carries over into the school environment where pupils must similarly show the same level of respect for their teachers and administrators. Unruly children are quickly punished, and punishments in front of the class may be used to both shame the child into obedience and show the other students the result of misbehavior, as a form of classroom management.

August (2012) outlines the typical conditions met by Belizean teachers in the field of preschool education. Preschool teachers come from varying educational backgrounds with some having attained a primary certificate while others have graduated from a teacher’s college with teaching certification. Employment in preschool can range from privately managed sites to government run schools. Typical work days are consistent with morning and afternoon sessions with instruction starting at 8:30am-11:30am, followed by afternoon break, and at 1:00pm-3pm. The pay scale of preschool teachers also varies with some teachers reporting monthly salaries as low as $400BZD ($200 USD) up to $1200 BZD ($600 USD) depending on experience and education. Regarding preparations, most preschools have adopted the national preschool curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education. Provisions for preschool teachers remain limited. Teachers must obtain materials and resources from donations from parents and community members. Teachers also report that the scarcity of classroom resources such as new toys and supplies limits their ability to teach in innovative ways.

The following section includes a discussion of the importance of play in early childhood education and teacher roles during children’s play.
Play in Early Childhood

Early childhood is a period that encompasses birth through age eight and is marked by physical, cognitive, and social/emotional growth and change, known as the developmental domains (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2016; Gordon & Browne, 2014). Early childhood education focuses on this period with a central goal in encouraging the expansion of the developmental domains of the growing child. Educational programs such as child care centers, preschools intervention programs and many more incorporate activities designed to promote children's learning among those play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children’s play is seen as one of the most stimulating and engaging activities for young children’s healthy growth and development. Early childhood researchers and theorists agree that children learn through play. Play scholars also agree that play is “the work of children” (Montessori, 1967; Paley, 2004).

Through play, children encounter a natural environment in which to explore their surrounding world. It is through this experiential learning that children form categories of information that they use to understand or learn new ways of thinking (Chowdhury & Rivalland, 2011). According to Jean Piaget, this type of learning is called assimilation and accommodation and explains how children absorb knowledge as part of his cognitive developmental theory (Gordon & Browne, 2015). As they play, children’s behaviors often include repetition, trial and error, cause and effect and sustained focus. Indeed, children can be seen displaying many of the characteristics of play in just one observation of a play session.

Although there is no set definition of play, there are generally agreed upon characteristics that most play scholars accept. These include positive affect, non-literality, intrinsic motivation, process orientation and free choice (Johnson et al., 2005; Van Hoorne et al., 2015). Play in children is seen to be enjoyable and able to maintain their attention. They choose activities of their own
volition, and usually incorporate aspects of symbolic representation. They also play for the sake of playing. Although all these characteristics justify why children play it is just as important to early childhood educators to justify why we should let them play.

Children’s play in the early childhood educational setting is seen to promote many areas of learning. Looking at play’s connections to the developmental domains, play can be an ideal setting to encourage a child’s cognitive development in all areas, particularly language development. Physical play can also spur children’s physical growth. Most of all, play is the child’s natural medium for practicing newly acquired social skills and emotional growth, such as self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013).

Self-regulatory skills fall under executive function, a term applied to children’s ability to manage their emotions, control their impulses, wait patiently, take turns, and follow basic directions. These skills are widely encouraged in early childhood before the start of school. Studies on play’s role in developing self-regulation in preschool children show that games such as “Simon Says,” “Mother May I,” and “Red Rover” are seen to improve these abilities (Parker-Pope, 2012). The nature of these games requires that child learn to listen and comprehend the verbal instructions and wait before responding, thus reducing the urge to act on impulses. As children improve developmentally in vocabulary and listening skills, they also show improvements in inhibitory control by regularly engaging in these types of games. Play can be used as a tool to promote and enhance learning and growth in the developmental domains.

Types of Play

Play scholars have categorized children’s play according to two types: cognitive stages of play, touted by Piaget and Smilansky, and social stages of play, as explained by Parten. The cognitive stages of play are broken into three stages and according to age range. Stage one is
known as practice play according to Piaget and functional play according to Smilansky. This initial stage of play aligns with the “infancy to age two” developmental stage and is marked by the child’s repetitive motions using toys and props or their own bodies (Johnson et al., 2005; Van Hoorne et al., 2015).

The next stage is symbolic play, which emerges during ages two to seven years. The child begins to show signs of symbolic representation at this stage by using toys and props with an imaginary purpose. Smilansky also separated the symbolic play stage into two areas. Constructive play specifically refers to the child building or constructing during play. Sociodramatic play refers to the child engaging in pretend play with toys, props and/or peers. Bredekamp (2004) explains further, “Characteristics of sociodramatic play include make-believe that involves roles, objects, and situations; persists for at least 10 minutes; and includes language and social interaction” (p. 20). The interactive and imaginative nature of sociodramatic play allows for sustained attention and focus as well as higher use of vocabulary and language development.

The last stage is games with rules and includes ages seven to eleven years. Children of school age are cognitively prepared to play games that require a list of agreed upon rules by all players. The group generally accepts children that understand the rules of the games played in a social setting while children that do not are quickly reprimanded or shunned from the game. As children get older, they begin to negotiate the rules of social games and manipulate them to suit the group’s desires. Piaget suggested that younger children can begin to appreciate games with rules, but it is typically when children enter the concrete operations stage of his cognitive stages of development that they are developmentally prepared to play games with rules.

Parten’s social stages of play include solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative play (Feeney et al., 2016). These stages also follow a progression that begins in infancy and continues
to preschool and school ages; however, each stage can overlap or appear in play behaviors of an older child. Beginning with solitary play, Parten explains that children first engage in play behaviors by themselves. Solitary play examples include stacking blocks, completing a puzzle, and playing in sand. The next stage that follows is parallel play. Two or more children that are playing side by side, but not engaging one another is seen as parallel play.

Associative play follows parallel play and involves two or more children playing side by side. However, in associative play, the children will begin to engage one another on a basic level, such as stopping their play to watch their playmate’s movements or reaching over to take a block or doll from their playmate’s play space. Finally, cooperative play involves the child’s full engagement of their peers during play. Cooperative or group play usually involves socio-dramatic play, in which all players create pretend play scenarios or games with rules, in which all players adhere to the rules of the game.

Each of these types of play encourages the child to stretch beyond their current stages of development and engage in activities that allow them to practice using newly acquired skills. Children that regularly engage in meaningful play, often seen as play that support one or more areas of learning, such as language and vocabulary, receive the benefit of such learning in a context that matches their developmental age and interests (Moon & Reifel, 2008; Veiga, Neto & Reiffe, 2016).

**Play’s Purpose in Preschool**

Play is also a useful tool in creating opportunities for children to work towards the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that indicate they are ready for school. When children play, they gain in vivo practice at skills that will contribute to school readiness. School readiness is not a specifically defined concept, rather it is a term used differently in many contexts (Powell, 2010).
For this discussion, school readiness is defined as a set of characteristics that include, “social, attitudinal, and affective learning such as independence, self-motivation, creativity, empathy, resilience, assertiveness, and positive self-esteem” (Gilbert, Harte & Patrick, 2011, p. 30).

Likewise, play does not adhere to a set definition but is characterized by the following attributes: intrinsic motivation, pleasurable, free choice, non-literal, actively engaging (Gilbert et al., 2011). The juncture between the concepts of play and school readiness is seen when the former is used in an intentional manner to support the latter. Purposeful or meaningful play is particularly useful and is illustrated by teacher-initiated techniques for using play with an educational purpose to support learning in any of the developmental domains of the preschool child. As Gilbert (2011) shows, “Play becomes purposeful when children’s potential for learning is enhanced while these attributes of play are maintained” (p. 30).

Knowledgeable teachers can lead or facilitate children's play by providing opportunities for meaningful play. These behaviors include making sufficient time for play in the daily schedule, providing props, toys, books and other materials, and engaging children in conversations as they play. Children will begin to refine their knowledge of skills necessary for readiness in the cognitive and social-emotional domains if they are regularly challenged with new and interesting activities that are enjoyable and sustaining. Play based activities in the preschool years provide the most fitting context for these behaviors to emerge (Van Hoorn et al., 2015).

Similarly, Bredekamp (2004) found that many children who engaged in quality play in early childhood consequently showed gains in the cognitive and social-emotional domains. These gains led to the development of school readiness through teacher-directed and free play. Goal-directed tasks were more likely to occur during teacher-planned, teacher-directed activities,
whereas higher-level social strategies were more likely to occur during child-initiated sociodramatic play or informal, active play with peers.

Children are shown to benefit from early learning environments planned by skilled teachers in which they can engage in purposeful play opportunities carefully crafted for practice in particular skill sets (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). There are established benefits to free play in the classroom as well as teacher-led tasks incorporating play elements. Most modern early childhood classrooms contain academically enhanced learning centers and schedule time for uninterrupted free play in the centers. Teachers arrange the early learning environments to provide plenty of opportunities for learning through exploration as part of intentional practices to spur children’s development of school readiness skills.

Play Supported in Theory

There are many theories that support children’s play, including Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT supports play’s role in children’s cognitive development according to Johnson et al. (2005), “Vygotsky believed that make-believe play has a key role in abstract thought, enabling children to think about meanings independently of the objects they represent” (p. 41). This notion is significant because although children are generally believed to be incapable of higher order thinking, Vygotsky shows that play pushes children to begin practicing such advanced levels of thinking. Such symbolic representational thinking that is both encouraged by and is a consistent part of socio-dramatic play is the stepping-stone for a child to begin producing a visualization of an object without a concrete example. Children can practice advanced skills within the low-risk, stress-free environment of their play (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky also explained how play is consistent with two key elements of his socio-cognitive developmental theory. First, the zone of proximal development is the area in which a
child can accomplish as task alone to the point where he cannot and will experience frustration. The child will need additional support in the form of a person, such as a teacher or a peer, or educational aid, such as a book, educational program or game, or technology aid. Vygotsky believed that children could work within their zones of proximal development and be scaffolded during play. He explained that the play activity itself could manifest as the child’s zone of proximal development in which a teacher or peer can assist the child in completing the task. Likewise, the play activity can also serve as a scaffold, aiding the child in accomplishing a new task or skill. Finally, play can be “viewed as a self-help tool that promotes learning.” In this view, children push themselves beyond their limits to enhance their own learning and self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978).

**Teachers’ Use of Play**

Teachers’ attitudes toward play can determine their likelihood of using play based learning in their own classrooms. As teachers acquire knowledge and skills in the significance of play in early childhood they must also begin to familiarize themselves with how to effectively utilize play in the classroom structure and learning activities. Teachers who become educated in how to incorporate play will transmit the most benefit to their students (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). Some ways that teachers can use play in the classroom include creating academically enriched centers, choosing materials to promote play, knowing the appropriate interactions and/or interventions in children's play and engaging children in conversations during play (Engel, 2015).

**Academically Enriched Centers.** Learning centers are areas of the classroom specifically designated by learning objective and that contain materials that a preschooler can manipulate independently. Teachers plan learning centers around learning objectives for the school year and select appropriate materials for each center that will encourage children to practice desired skills.
In addition, a teacher may have established physical learning centers and are fixed and do not change in structure as well as smaller, learning centers that the teacher may change several times according to the theme or unit being taught. Examples of learning centers include reading/listening center, writing center, science center, blocks center, dramatic play center, art center, music center, quiet corner or sand and water table. Centers such as these represent the permanent physical centers of the classroom. Small centers that rotate regularly may include small games or manipulatives related to the weekly themes. In addition, permanent centers may be enhanced using additional props, toys, or decorations to make the existing center new and stimulating for the children (Johnson et al., 2005; Van Hoorne, 2015). For example, the dramatic play center may be adapted to the theme of “Jungle” by hanging pretend vines overhead and adding toys such as stuffed animals of monkeys, tropical birds, jaguars, and snakes.

**Choosing Materials.** Teachers should know that choosing the right materials is important to preparing the play environment. Toys and materials must be appropriate according to the ages or developmental levels of the children. They should also be safe and stimulating. It is important to provide materials that engage children’s imaginative thinking when they begin to display symbolic representation in their play. Props such as pretend food, cookware, and utensils promote pretend play that also serves as imitation or practice play of the children’s daily lives. Children also need sufficient open-ended materials such as crayons, markers and paint in the art centers and sand, water or play dough to encourage creativity (Feeney et al., 2016).

**Interactions/Interventions.** Teacher interactions during children’s play are one aspect of teacher’s involvement. A teacher may believe it is important to engage children when they are playing to justify the time provided for free play. At times, these interactions can appear intrusive, particularly when the child is redirected or stops playing as a result of the teacher’s presence. In
other moments, a teacher's intervention can be necessary. If there is a foreseen risk of injury to the child, or to another child then a teacher must intervene. Minor disputes between players may also provide context for teachers to intervene (Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

Conversations. Teachers have an opportunity to support children’s learning when they become involved during children’s play. The conversations that teachers have with children are helpful in promoting critical thinking, encouraging the use of vocabulary, and promoting greater self-awareness and social skills. Teachers should aim to ask open-ended questions when speaking to children. They should also encourage children to tell stories about their play and act out child-authored stories, as suggested by Paley (2004).

Although little is known about the current attitudes of Caribbean early educators toward play, it is assumed that play is a fixture in many Caribbean preschools due to the historical prominence of partnerships between Western universities and organizations in launching early childhood initiatives and programs in the region. Since influences from Western notions of education have been prominent in designing the program goals, curriculum and implementation there is a strong likelihood that these programs will mirror early educational philosophies and classrooms in Western nations (Lewis, 2000; Williams, 1997).

In Belize, there is an influence on educational systems by British and American educational philosophies. As such, preschools model American and British preschools in structure, curriculum, and goals. Belize has a long history of following the educational direction of British schooling and making similar mandates, such as attendance and enrollment, as well as educational reforms, including the expansion of early childhood education. Regarding structure, a Belizean preschool classroom will feature learning centers or “corners” where children can play with various toys and materials with a specific goal or theme, morning meeting area for circle time songs and calendar
review, outdoor play, snack, and free play included in the daily schedule. This serves as an example of how Belize has adopted the educational philosophies affirmed by Western nations as important components of an effective early learning program.

Teacher Roles

Teacher interactions during children’s play vary greatly depending on their attitudes, assumptions, and dispositions toward play in the curriculum. Jones and Reynolds (2011) discuss the important role of teacher involvement in children’s play. The many roles that teachers assume as children are playing have varying levels of influence. Teachers that know how and when to engage children, ask questions, and intervene on the play will assume the most appropriate roles. Teachers’ roles in play can be seen according to their level of interactions. The teacher as stage manager is the most commonly observed, where the teacher arranges the props and materials and the play scenario, then steps aside to observe. Other roles include planner, scribe, teller, mediator, assessor and communicator, and player, according to Jones & Reynolds (2011).

Planner. Teachers assume the role of planner when they prepare activities in advance for children. These may be child-initiated, and teacher planned or curriculum-generated play. Teachers know how to plan for meaningful play experiences and do so by preparing an environment with appropriate materials for children to explore.

Scribe. Teachers become scribes for children’s dramatized play sessions when they document scenes. A child’s play is full of rich, detailed stories and language. Often vocabulary picked up in daily discussions and lessons makes its way into the play corner. Teachers can listen actively and record the words, phrases, and even story scripts of children while they play (Jones & Reynold, 2011; Paley, 2004).
**Teller.** This role is deemed inappropriate for teachers to adopt due to the interference with play. Teachers that become tellers often interject, redirect, or dictate what children must say and do. This is not beneficial to a child’s creativity, imagination, and free will. This traditional role can be replaced with more appropriate teacher roles.

**Mediator.** Even in a group of mature players, teachers must stay close by to guide and support children as they play. Inevitably, there will be times when teachers must intervene and/or mediate while children are playing. This can be due to conflicts or disagreements between players, or it can simply mean aiding in problem-solving.

**Assessor and Communicator.** Teachers can use play as a tool to help them in other areas of their profession. As teachers gather data on student performance, they must look to developmentally appropriate ways of assessing student knowledge. Play is a means of authentic assessment and a use method of collecting information on students. Teachers observe and engage children as they play to find out more about what they know and have not yet acquired. Communication of this knowledge with families, other educators, and administrators can take the form of sharing pictures, videos, and samples of student work.

**Player.** A teacher player is a welcome addition to children’s play. Young children often approach adults with the desire to have them join in play. It can be difficult to know how and when to join children at play. A teacher must determine appropriate times and purposes for becoming a player. If a child needs challenge, assistance, encouragement or coaching, and other areas of development, teachers can join in as they play to provide such supports within the context of play.

Further discussion on teacher roles in play is explained by Johnson et al. (2005). The following roles that teachers often assume in the early childhood educational setting as children play include:
**Uninvolved.** The uninvolved teacher does not watch the children or interact with them during play or engage them while playing. The teacher may be occupied or unaware of how to engage in play.

**Onlooker.** The onlooker role is assumed when the teacher simply watches children as they play without interacting. The teacher may be observing or may not know how to engage children at play.

**Stage Manager.** The stage manager is a teacher who sets the stage for play. The teacher will arrange the setting and provide the props that the children will use. This is an increased level of involvement, but the teacher will remain on the periphery of play.

**Co-Player.** The teacher as co-player will be involved in the children’s play scenarios. Often the children ask the teacher to join them at play. The teacher will engage them at their request but not attempt to direct the play.

**Play Leader.** The play leader assumes the role of organizing the children in a play space to begin a play scenario. The children may still dictate the events of the play session, but the teacher will arrange and initiate pretend play. Likewise, the teacher may lead children through particular games such as “Follow the Leader,” and “Ring around the Rosie.” This role is a much higher level of involvement.

**Director/Redirector.** The director or redirector is a teacher that assumes the role of planning, setting the stage, assigning roles, and establishing the plot of a pretend play session. The teacher may also step into play already in session and redirect the focus. This is the highest level of teacher involvement and leaves little room for children’s imaginative thinking and creative expression.
These roles reflect how teachers feel about children's play and influence how often teachers will allow opportunities for educational play in the classroom. A teacher that supports play, understands its use and purpose, and makes time to allow for uninterrupted play in the classroom will know how and when to intervene on children's play. A general view of interventions during play assumes that children should be allowed time for unstructured play as well as structured play. The teacher that is trained in both will allow for sufficient time and opportunities for each.

Teacher interactions can take on a varied level of intensity, where the uninvolved and onlooker role indicates a low level of involvement from teachers during children’s play, and play leader or director represents a high level of involvement from teachers. Neither role used in isolation is the best approach. Rather, teachers should understand when and where to employ a higher and lower level of involvement when they observe children at play. As teachers become accustomed to the use of play in the early childhood classroom and gain greater experience observing how children play, they acquire the expertise needed to know how and when to permeate between these roles.

**Play Supported Programs**

Many ECE programs understand how important play is to childhood and regularly incorporate play into the curriculum. Others take play as the sole focus and design curriculum around play behaviors. In the Tools of the Mind program, the Vygotskian notion of the use of mental tools to learn is central to creating environments and activities that enhance learning in early childhood (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The Tools of the Mind curriculum is one that undoubtedly supports play. The mental tools that children are encouraged to develop are promoted through active engagement with the environment. Children then use these experiences to form skills known as executive functions that serve to enhance the behaviors likely to promote further
learning. The Tools of the Mind curriculum fully utilizes the Vygotskian tools of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding to create optimal learning environments and experiences.

Despite the purported benefits of play-based early education to the young child, the main source of contention towards play in recent decades has emerged as a result of increased accountability and standards-based education. Increasingly, early childhood educators report feeling pressured to increase the rigor of their preschool classrooms to ensure that their students are well prepared for elementary school. Though it appears counter-intuitive to the research, many preschool teachers choose to forego playful learning activities in place of standards-based deskwork, worksheets, and assessments. Even for teachers that do adopt play, the emphasis is most placed on educational play in order to meet learning outcomes. Wood (2014) explains that young children lose out on the opportunity to develop a love of spontaneous learning when preschool teachers remove free play from the early childhood classroom. The balance of teacher-guided versus child-guided play is necessary to allow children these rich experiences.

**Theories of Development**

The theories of Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky and Rogoff guide this study. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST) is used to explain the nested systems surrounding the developing child that constitute the interactional nature of environments on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner’s explanation of the environments that surround the child serves as an illumination of each layer of influence in a typical human life. In addition, this theory highlights the importance of social circles as support systems or change agents that affect a growing child. Lastly, cultural factors are also of concern when discussing EST as each society influences how its citizenry experiences their surrounding world, communities, neighborhoods, and home life.
Bronfenbrenner and Development

Any study on cultural representations in educational systems must rely on previously established theories of cultural studies. Bronfenbrenner’s EST provides a comprehensive framework for applying culture to development within the context of the many structures that make up a society. Additionally, the shifting nature of culture means that changes that happen over time through generational shifts, outside influences and political influences, to name a few, can ultimately change how society views a particular issue.

Bronfenbrenner theory is rooted in the importance of contexts surrounding the individual. His notion of “proximal processes,” part of his “process-person-context-time (PPCT) model” is discussed by Tudge et al. (2017) as “the everyday activities and interactions in with developing individuals engage” (p. 46). Bronfenbrenner saw each interaction that the developing child had with their environment as significant. This idea expounded upon the influence of the environment on the child as a unique process, dynamic and changing with time and circumstance. The process, person, context, and time model serves to emphasize how each area functions interchangeably as influencers on development. Bronfenbrenner’s EST highlights the influences of multiple environments on the growing individual. These environments are defined as the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gordon & Browne, 2015; Rogoff, 2003). Several categories of interaction define them:

Microsystem. The immediate setting surrounding the developing child that forms the basis of influence. For this study, the microsystem has been identified as the preschool classroom with the teacher as the primary person of influence on the children. Other settings that can be attributed to the microsystem in this study are the homes and families of the students, the local churches that
the children are families regularly attend, and the surrounding neighborhoods including shops, restaurants, parks, etc.

Mesosystem. This sphere of influence identifies the interaction between many different Microsystems surrounding the developing child. This study focuses primarily on events that took place in the preschool. However, the various other settings that make up the mesosystem also interact in ways that may affect the developing child. For this study, these interactions can be seen in the form of parent-teacher conferences and informal conversations, interactions between the teacher and families in other settings such as church services and in community-wide school events such as “Conservation Day,” and “Early Childhood Stimulation Month.”

Exosystem. The type of setting where the child does not play an essential role but that may influence him or her nonetheless is known as the exosystem. This setting can be attributed to the parent’s workplace, school-wide staff meetings, the government early childhood task force committee and the Ministry of Education. These are environments where decisions can be made that serve the purpose of that group or organization's goals that can and do ultimately affect the developing child.

Macrosystem. The macrosystem forms all the congruencies across each setting with a culture that result in belief systems, customs, and practices representative the society and people. For the purposes of this study, the macrosystem is expressed as the cultural belief that early childhood is important and should be valued.

Chronosystem. The chronosystem explains how time can influence beliefs, values, and behaviors within each system. In the field of education there are many instances where beliefs on best teaching practices can shift over time. As new research becomes known methods of educating children can be influenced and adapted. Also, teachers should use methods that allow for changing
influence over time. Tudge et al. (2017) explains that children should experience “progressive challenges” in their learning environments. These influences instilled by teachers will help students move along a developmental learning path that progresses their education over time. When members of the microsystem, macrosystem, and exosystem accept changing views and adopt new patterns of behaviors, these changes provide a new layer of influence to the growing individual.

Bronfenbrenner’s EST functions as a theoretical basis for understanding cultural influences on child development (Gordon & Browne, 2015; Tudge et al., 2017). Each system represents an environment of shared learning for the growing child. As the child interacts with these various settings they receive messages about their own identities and cultures. These messages shape the child’s understanding of self, community, and societal norms (Rogoff, 2003, p. 44).

Within each system, there are spheres of influence that can reach the child and affect their daily experiences. As each system functions, they interact. The interactions can prove to alter or influence one another. Major spheres of influence, such as families, schools, neighborhoods, and society can show immediate effects on a developing child if there are any significant changes (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). For this study, Bronfenbrenner’s theory is used to show how the microsystem of individual preschool classrooms and teachers are influenced by information put forth from the macrosystem represented by the Belizean government’s educational agency, the Ministry of Education.

The microsystem involves all levels interaction between the child and the immediate family members and caregivers, community, and school. The child naturally notices the family’s values, norms and expectations through these interactions. Outer environmental influences from the exosystem and macrosystem affect the child indirectly yet have meaningful impacts also. Indirect
influences based on what happens in the home shape a child's individual and cultural meaning making. Messages from the school, church and community settings serve to reinforce value systems instilled by the family (Gordon & Browne, 2015). Furthermore, media messages through television, radio or other media sources also serve to influence the child's understanding of self, worthiness, and success.

At the microsystem level the individual teachers selected for this study show how they interpret, understand, and enact the mission of the Ministry of Education for the educational outcome of preschool. Each teacher explains their process of planning, implementing instruction, assessing, and evaluating students through the preschool year. The teachers’ instruction is analyzed through a series of vignettes that show how they are implemented appropriated macrosystem influences. The interaction between what is taking place at the macro and micro level is analyzed to show how each influence the developing child.

At the macrosystem level, the Ministry of Education documents such as the curriculum and the action plan for educational reform provide evidence of the government’s goals for expansion of early childhood education. This information is disseminated as key tools for teachers to understand, interpret and enact the government’s educational goals at the early childhood level. Preschool teachers know that they must use the curriculum guide and an official from the Ministry’s quality assurance office will evaluate them yearly. This macrosystem level influence is discussed in the teacher’s discourse on planning and instruction.

The societal structure of Belize in the educational context can be understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s concept of the microsystem and the macrosystem. Here, Belize’s government organization of education, the Ministry of Education, represents the macrosystem, and the local schools, represent the microsystem. The interaction between what takes place at the
societal level in the macrosystem ultimately serves to effect change at the local school level in the microsystem, which has a direct influence on the teachers and the children. Belize’s current educational focus on developing early childhood serves as a foundation for understanding the data presented in this study on a macro/micro level. As more teachers are trained and staffed to meet the growing societal awareness of the importance of early education, there will be greater opportunities for young Belizean children to start school well-prepared to learn.

Beginning at the microsystem level, the immediate surroundings of the child serve to influence their development through day-to-day interactions. “Microsystems, according to Bronfenbrenner, are the individual’s immediate experiences – the settings containing the child and others, such as home and school” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 47). The immediate influence of the macrosystem to the child can be seen in the immediate family. Certainly, prominent influences such as the home life, financial stability, and the level of positive interactions between the child and the members of the family provide direct evidence of microsystem functions. Also, any changes in the family structure and stability of the home cause immediate effects on the individual child’s development.

Immediate influences outside the home include community organizations and services such as churches, schools, and family services. Looking specifically at schools, teachers, classrooms, and classmates form the next prominent circle of influence for the growing child. Children receive messages on how to speak, behave, think, respond, and learn within the context of school. Early schooling experiences set the stage for learning during the formative years of a young child’s life. Early childhood teachers play an important role in young children’s development. In a cultural setting, children also pick up on cultural knowledge that is reinforced in the school setting through both direct instruction and modeling from the teacher. Peers also serve to influence young children.
They learn how to observe, interact, and get along with members of their communities first through siblings and later through schoolmates. They also corroborate their understanding of their role as a member of a particular gender, age, and a member of a community through their peers.

Similarly, in the educational setting of a preschool classroom, children also influence their school microsystem through their behaviors. Children respond to their environments through their behaviors in response to variability in resilience toward overstimulation and under stimulation. In simpler terms, children respond positively or negatively depending on how they cope with too much or too little stimulation from their environments. While children tend to respond well to classroom environments that are engaging and provide sufficient challenge. If children are not challenged enough, they can develop boredom and act out. Children also influence one another in a peer modeling relationship. When children observe behaviors amongst themselves, they tend to pick up behaviors, both positive and negative and repeat them. The role of the teacher is to guide children behaviors and model appropriate or desired behavior that children should adopt.

The macrosystem comprises society norms, views and ideals that are widely adopted and that effect change when there are shifts in these constructs. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains:

Within any culture or subculture, settings of a given kind – such as homes, streets, or offices – tend to be very much alike, whereas between cultures they are distinctly different. It is as if within each society or subculture there existed a blueprint for the organization of every type of setting. Furthermore, the blueprint can be changed, with the result that the structure of the settings in a society can become markedly altered and produce corresponding changes in behavior and development. (p. 4)

Bronfenbrenner shows that societal norms are such that they can be easily compared but none function exactly alike. These norms can also shift and change over time. Many shifts and changes take place over time in education in the form of educational reforms and legislative acts meant to improve educational outcomes for students. Changes that take place on the national level through government acts and reforms can have a huge impact all the way down to the microsystems
of schools and the families they serve. If legislation passed, that improves services and outcomes for children that can be seen as a positive change. Educational reform can also impact teachers greatly as well. If reforms are aimed at limited teachers’ professional abilities, it can potentially result in a negative impact to the microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST) is an approach that allows for a comprehensive analysis of all the major influencing individuals and environments, as well as the interaction between these systems as well as the interaction between these systems, that shape the developing child. This theoretical approach lends itself to a study of cultural factors in the education of young children. The theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model allows for a discussion of the micro and macro levels of influence that is at play when teachers make decisions, enact instruction and plan for learning outcomes for their students from a cultural, community and societal level.

**Vygotsky and Development**

Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory (SCT) evolved from his reworking of existing major theoretical assumptions of how children develop, think, and learn. Vygotsky touted theories put forth by key figures such as Piaget and Koffka, but ultimately rejected these for his theory of the zone of proximal development. For Vygotsky, children demonstrate growth and learning when they are challenged beyond demonstrating the knowledge they are acquired independently and instead are asked to work within their zone of possibility. The key component of Vygotsky’s theory is the need for social interaction to improve acquisition of knowledge. The child can demonstrate what they have learned independently through testing, but they can only acquire new and advanced thinking with the help of a teacher or knowledgeable peer. Vygotsky also put forth similar notions on how children approach play and the relationship between learning and development.
One of Vygotsky’s most influential commentaries on the education of young children was his discussion of the interaction between learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) ushered in a new way of thinking about our approaches to teaching young children when he created the zone of proximal development. His discussion highlights three theoretical assumptions about the relationship between learning and development that were widely accepted in his day. The first was that learning, and development occurred in isolation. This view was largely a maturation philosophy that put forth a child development as the primary component for learning to take place on a secondary level. Vygotsky was among the school of thought that ultimately rejected maturation, not in theory but application. Next, the notion that learning and development were interconnected, or the same was explored. He explained that while learning is related to development, they could not be easily conflated without comprising the integrity of each complex system. Finally, a discussion on the integration of both approaches combined was reviewed but rejected for lack of scope.

Thus, Vygotsky birthed the theory of the zone of proximal development that placed a high emphasis on the child’s individual abilities as evidenced through their measured mental age, and that of their potential as evidenced through their potential mental age with adequate supports. According to Vygotsky (1978), “If a child can do such-and-such independently, it means that the functions for such-and-such have matured in her” (p. 86). The support that a teacher, peer, or anyone more knowledgeable in a target skill can provide the child is seen as the key to Vygotsky’s notion of scaffolding. A scaffold provides the support to catapult the child from their actual to their potential mental age.

Vygotsky’s scaffolding technique provided supporting evidence of the importance of a social interactional element to learning and development as well as differentiated instruction.
Vygotsky states, “The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state” (p. 86). Vygotsky likens children's future potential to budding flowers or fruits that simply have to be provided with the right environment and support to develop fully. These notions of the relationship between growth, development, and learning provide strong evidence for the necessity of a beneficial, stimulation early learning environment in which children are allowed to develop and learn from one another and an encouraging caregiver.

Vygotsky’s commentary on children play offered a similar approach to a providing a supportive environment as well as a discussion of the child’s motivation to play. Vygotsky challenged the notion that children play as a form of work and simply for the pleasure that play evokes. Vygotsky explained that enjoyment is not the sole motivating factor for why children engage in play and it is necessary to look at other factors as well. In some certain types of play, such as sports or games with rules where they child can lose the game, children do not experience enjoyment and would thus negate the notion that children play for the pleasure of it.

Vygotsky commented on another generalized assumption that children play to satisfy certain needs. According to Vygotsky the contrary is more likely, “It is my belief that if needs that could not be realized immediately did not develop during the school years, there would be no play, because play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93).

Vygotsky explained that for certain children unmet needs serve as a motivating factor to play. The potential for realizing an unmet need vicariously is capable through imaginary play. When children play, they can dream up any likely scenario desired. So, the child that has been told they cannot have an ice cream cone can go directly to their play corner, pick up a crayon and
pretend they are licking a large ice cream cone. The unmet need is realized through the child's imagination and the unpleasant emotions attached are temporarily assuaged. Vygotsky explains this process further, “Toward the beginning of preschool age, when desires that cannot be immediately gratified or forgotten make their appearance and the tendency to immediate fulfillment of desires, characteristic of the preceding stage, is retained, the child’s behavior changes. To resolve this tension, the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93).

Additionally, when children play, they are often pretending at scenarios they have previously experienced. Vygotsky did not believe that children actually pretend at real life, rather they play at what a real-life scenario should look like. He mentions that children often follow scripts designed to keep their play prescribed toward notions of prior knowledge of concepts. When children play house, they play at what a mother should do with their child and how a mother should keep house and so forth. Vygotsky also explained that play presents the child with the unique circumstance of both behavioral affordance and constraint. While children can escape reality into the world of imaginary play, they also must regulate their impulses to stay within the confines of the imaginary play scenario. This is particularly true of socio-dramatic play involving peers and with games with rules. It is the natural tendency of a child to want to act out impulsively or change their assigned roles or perhaps even break the rules of a game. However, if they want to continue to engage in the play scenario and appease their play partners, they must learn inhibitory control. These aspects of self-regulation are shown to be critical components of a child's ability to plan and regulate their behaviors to acclimate to school-based learning.
Vygotsky’s theory of social construction of knowledge involves scaffolding the child's learning through the zone of proximal development. This theory is significant in the social aspect of teaching and learning. Learning and development are shown to be processes that can be best supported in a social learning environment. Vygotsky also put forth his notions for the reasoning behind children’s play and the motivations for their engagement in play. To Vygotsky, children did not play for the sake of playing. Rather, their desire to play could stem from an unmet need. Children also learn how to engage their peers in play, how to use their imaginations to recreate and practice realistic scenarios and how to regulate their impulses. These are all skills that can manifest later in higher order thinking tasks that found their roots in imaginary play.

Rogoff’s Three Planes of Sociocultural Development

Rogoff’s (1995) three planes of sociocultural development theory helps to explain the levels of interaction that function from a cultural context to influence development. Rogoff’s theory is a continuation of Vygotsky’s illustration of the interaction between the learner and the environment. Rogoff focuses on examples of specific interactions as cultural influencers to the developing child. These interactions – apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation, function in an integrated manner to describe the three “sociocultural activities” that Rogoff believes shape development: community/institutional, interpersonal, and personal. The apprenticeship activity serves as an opportunity for individuals to practice the customs of their culture. These “culturally organized activities” are those that are regularly performed in their communities at home, school, and other settings. The guided participation element includes the conversations and interactions that take place as individuals perform cultural roles with mentoring in their communities. Finally, the participatory appropriation part explains how individuals learn
to adapt their intentions and actions to the setting or role they are fulfilling within their communities often via observational learning (Rogoff, 1995).

Rogoff’s (1995) three planes theory of sociocultural development is used to explain the interactions between study participants and their students. The cultural nature of Belizean preschool teaching was evident in the case studies. Teachers found many opportunities to impart cultural knowledge to the children. They experienced daily lessons in cultural identity formation through interactions with their teacher and peers. There was evidence of guided participation and participatory appropriation according to Rogoff’s theory:

Guided participation occurs when an individual actively participates in cultural activities. Through social interaction, conversations and completing tasks the individual picks up on cultural cues and funds of knowledge. Participatory appropriate is the process through which the individual is convinced of the importance of their role in cultural activities. Through their participation in social processes they form a cognitive bond with their culture assigning value to the customs and ensure their lifelong participation. This layer stresses the interdependence of the participant and those around them to impart cultural knowledge (Rogoff, 1995)

Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (DCAP)

Another conceptual framework that assisted this study was developmentally and culturally appropriate practice developed by Hyun (1998). Although a discussion of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is acceptable for most studies of preschool education, Hyun’s framework highlights the importance of cultural aspects of teaching in culturally diverse environments.

Developmental and culturally appropriate practice (DCAP) put forth by Hyun (1998) in response to the NAEYC’s DAP posits that the original framework did not fully highlight the significance of culture and diversity; DCAP is to assist educators better in dealing with the cultural complexity that stems from the wide variation of culturally and linguistically different young children and their families that they as ECE teachers serve. DCAP addresses the need for greater
clarity in how to respond to the challenge of meeting the needs of children and families from various backgrounds.

The typical United States classroom presents the unique circumstance of a wide variety of cultural backgrounds represented in one room. As a result, teachers must be prepared to address a host of norms and values that each family adheres to. For some people, cultural assertions can take the form of food restrictions, religious or spiritual customs and beliefs, and moral/ethical concerns. While DAP offer suggestions on how early childhood teachers can support families, there is little clarity on navigating cultural contentions or mismatch between the program’s goals and the family’s desires. At best, DAP suggests that when met with many options, the best an educator can do is meet with every family individually and ensure that they can agree on the best plan of action to serve the education and developmental needs of the child while maintaining the family’s wishes (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

DAP maintains the importance of establishing healthy and supporting relationships with families as part of framework of an effective program. DCAP takes this guideline a step further and offers tips, tools, and suggestions for how to utilize student’s cultural backgrounds as a resource in the classroom. Teachers can highlight and celebrate the cultures of children as a teaching tool. They can also encourage active participation and engagement from families by inviting them in to teach their classes about the cultures they represent.

As a whole, DCAP is a framework that presses the need for increased awareness of diversity in our ever-changing world (Hyun, 1998). Children and families from various backgrounds, structures, beliefs, and abilities all deserve the chance at a robust education and equal opportunities. The early childhood years are the foundation of a good education. Early childhood educators that recognize the importance of accommodating to and celebrating children or students
from diverse backgrounds are vital. Promoting healthy relationships among teachers, parents and children is needed for the future of a children’s education.

Similarly, developmentally, and contextually appropriate practice is a theoretical approach to teaching identified by Tobin, Karasawa, & Hsueh (2009). For Tobin and associates, the environment and learning context, such as teacher practices and cultural norms, play a role in defining appropriate preschool practice. Through their research in Japanese, Chinese, and American preschools, the authors were able to identify practices that were specific to each cultural setting and appropriate to the trusted cultural practices surrounding early education and care. Teachers in each study site provided unique aspects of their observed behaviors and thought processes in the study using video recall and interviews. The overarching assumption is that evaluating teaching and guiding young children in specific cultures requires a deeper understanding of cultural contexts to deem practices appropriate based on culture (Tobin, Karasawa, & Huseh, 2009).

**Summary**

Developing nations often appear to the outsider as places where educational attainment and schooling is undervalued and undeveloped. This perspective is difficult to challenge without an opportunity to provide evidence that these notions are false or misguided. Early childhood teachers of developing nations also receive their fair share of criticism inadequately preparing young children for education for life. Studies such as the present one can provide more groundwork for illuminating the education of young children in developing nations. Information on school readiness from the cultural context of Western nations must be adapted to the cultural environment of the nation in question. The Belizean education system is strongly influenced by practices in
Western nations such as Great Britain and the United States, which allows for greater comparison (Lewis, 2000).

Teachers in Belize are currently expected to uphold higher standards in their practice by obtaining early childhood training and certification (Ministry of Education, 2012). By obtaining this training, teachers in Belize will begin to learn more about play pedagogy, including how to develop mature play in children and assess the quality of their play, and understand how they can utilize play-based instruction in the classroom. Case studies of Belizean preschool teacher’s experiences in practice provide examples of progress toward the Ministry’s goals for ECE outlined in the action plan. The case studies provide a deeper information on how the teachers understand and enact best practices early childhood. These case studies examine the teacher’s knowledge and background in ECE and play pedagogy, information on the constraints and affordances of their profession, and issues that they experienced in meeting the goals set forth by Ministry.

This study aimed to collect the stories, reflections and accounts of how preschool teachers view play and whether they view a connection between early childhood learning and play. The conditions in which the teachers worked was also examined to provide information on how the teachers are performing in meeting the specified goals for early childhood education improvement. Discussions of the teacher’s educational attainment and early childhood specific training, such as play pedagogy, were examined. Teachers had the opportunity to explain their understandings of how play and academic learning may intersect to provide developmental enrichment to the children they serve. This study provides the opportunity for these underrepresented groups to be heard and add to the conversation of early education in developing nations. The case studies of the early schooling practices of two early childhood educators in the culturally rich setting of Belize provided insight into this discussion. This research endeavored to explore the ways that preschool
teachers in a unified culture work to prepare children for school. The themes and patterns that emerged address the unique ways that culture can influence early schooling for diverse groups of children in the specific communities shown within Belize’s subcultures.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with a qualitative case study design using interviews, participant observations, researcher field notes, and vignettes, as well as photographs and audio-recorded lessons as the methods for collecting study data. These methods proved both appropriate and useful to the purpose of the study. I selected the location as a site of interest due my familiarity with the setting and personal interest in the expansion of early childhood education there. Information presented in this chapter include an explanation of study methods, participant recruitment and background information, study setting, and a rationale for the methods used to inform the research study.

Data Collection

Participant observations entailed visiting each selected preschool in the study setting of Belize, Central America. I physically recorded observations in a field notebook and audio-recorded lessons over a four-week period in June of 2015. Activities and daily routines were observed between two preschool teachers and their students each in individual cases. I spent two weeks on site of case one and two weeks on site of case two. Total hours of data collected including observational and interview data were 31.5 hours.

In site one, 14 total observational hours were collected in field notes and audio-recordings. In site two, 15 total observational hours were collected in field notes and audio-recordings for a total of 29 hours of observational data collected across both research sites. The remaining two and
one-half hours of collected data were comprised of audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. I prepared transcriptions of the interviews following the data collection (see Appendix F and G).

I observed teacher interactions with preschool children, teacher interactions with parents, preschool children at play in their educational setting, preschool children during instructional time and parent/teacher interactions at drop off time. For the study presentation, I divided the study sites and participant observational data into two areas: rural setting and urban setting. The rural setting was presented from data collected in a small village in the northern district of Belize, Corozal. The small community setting made for a specific data set that introduced its own themes. The preschool site in Belmopan represented the urban setting. This site illustrated an additional perspective on the research study introducing both similar and unique themes as they emerged from the data set.

I generated vignettes by using composite sketches of all relational observation data from each case. According to Hughes (1998), vignettes are “stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (p. 381). The vignettes compiled for this study include examples of instruction or interactions observed that highlight a meaningful connection with the study data and the research questions posed in the study. Similarly, Hill (1999) states that vignettes include “Short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios” (p. 177). The vignettes I crafted highlight study data tied closely to the thematic elements of the preschools and teachers observed. Two vignettes were generated for each case study.

Study interviews included both informal and formal interviews. Formal interviews were arranged and conducted with each study participant according to their availability. Mr. Cortés participated in an interview that lasted one hour. Ms. Tuk participated in an interview that lasted ninety minutes. The interview method chosen for the proposed study was semi-structured
These interviews allow researchers to approach a study with a thematic conceptualization of what is to be collected well established. This can only be accomplished with either a structured or semi-structured interview. To do so, I compiled a list of interview questions in advance (see Appendix D). I defined informal interviews as conversations and explanations of the teacher’s practices, preschool program, and other areas related to the study, also took place at both sites during and outside of school hours with each study participant.

Data collection timelines consisted of informal interviews beginning June 8, 2015, with a formal interview on June 16, 2015, in Semilla; and informal interviews beginning on June 24, 2015, and a formal interview on June 28, 2015, in Belmopan. Classroom practice observations were conducted on June 8-18, 2015 in Semilla, and June 22-July 3, 2015 in Belmopan, Belize. These processes afforded a specific view of the current educational practices in early childhood in Belize from the perspective of two preschool teachers in different sites: rural site, Semilla Protestant School and urban site, Toucan Preschool. My experiences in the study sites were well-documented using field notes, audio recording, and photographs, which serve as evidence-based artifacts for this study. See Table 3.1 for an overview of the study methods aligned with the research questions.
### Table 3.1 Study Methods

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<th>Method</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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| 1. Participant Observations & Vignettes | Recorded lessons, written notes of daily instruction, children’s play and interactions, teacher interactions during children’s play, parent/teacher interactions  | Q.1: How does a Belizean preschool teacher 1) describe and 2) enact the use of play in the classroom?  
Q.2: What are the positive early childhood practices currently in place in a Belizean preschool? What affords them and facilitates them?  
Q.3: What are the compromised early childhood practices in a Belizean preschool? What external constraints are present that contribute to the compromised practices? |
| 2. Interviews   | Recorded semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers in site 1 & site 2 | Q.1: How does a Belizean preschool teacher 1) describe and 2) enact the use of play in the classroom?  
Q.2: What are the positive early childhood practices currently in place in a Belizean preschool? What affords them and facilitates them?  
Q.3: What are the compromised early childhood practices in a Belizean preschool? What external constraints are present that contribute to the compromised practices? |
| 3. Artifacts    | Photographs of study sites, classrooms, daily schedules, curriculum guides | Q.2: What are the positive early childhood practices currently in place in a Belizean preschool? What affords them and facilitates them?  
Q.3: What are the compromised early childhood practices in a Belizean preschool? What external constraints are present that contribute to the compromised practices? |
The interview phase of the data collection at the first preschool site was conducted on June 16, 2015 (See Appendix C for the interview script). The interview was audio recorded and lasted for approximately one hour and was conducted in the teacher’s preschool classroom during the afternoon session. Mr. Cortés explained that afternoons would work best because the assistant teacher oversaw leading the afternoon sessions for the younger children and the activities were less rigorous (since they were three and four years old).

During the interview, I used follow up probes connected to the interview items and related to my research questions for the study; and also, this researcher was able to ask detailed questions related to context-specific topics; that is, what I had already observed and learned about Mr. Cortés’s classroom.

Additionally, the study artifacts, generated in the form of photographs, are presented with detailed descriptions. Artifacts collected included photographs of the study research sites, school grounds and playgrounds, indoor environments of the classroom, and documents such as curriculum guides, daily preschool schedules, and assessment booklets. These artifacts were used in the case study data presentation to show evidence of described concepts in each case.
Study Setting

Over the course of one month, I visited two preschools in two separate locations in Belize, (see figure 3.1). The first site, Semilla Protestant School, is a protestant, primary school in Semilla, a village in northeast Belize in the district of Corozal, located four hours from Belize City by road. The village of Semilla was a small, low socio-economic status community that consisted of primarily laborers and homemakers. The population of Semilla was 3,500 according to the Statistical Institute of Belize (2013).

Semilla Protestant School served approximately half of the primary school aged children in the village with an enrollment of 241 students in grades Preschool-Standard VI. Preschool enrollment in the district of Corozal was 43% of all eligible preschool-aged children with a total number of 903 children enrolled according to the 2014-2015 Educational Statistics released by the Ministry of Education. VI. There was one preschool classroom in the school. The preschool classroom had a total enrollment of 42 students in 2015. Of the 42 students enrolled, 31 four to five-year-old children were enrolled in the morning session and 11 three to four-year-old students enrolled in the afternoon session. Each session lasted approximately three hours. Children were
dropped off and picked up by their families at each session, with no school transportation provided. Children arrived with book bags containing their snack for the session. Some families purchased hot lunches from the snack kiosk located on the school grounds. The school provided all other materials for the school day. Most children enrolled were of the Mestizo ethnic origin and were Spanish speakers. Other ethnic groups present were Kriol and Asian. The instruction was provided in both English and Spanish, with the English as the primary language spoken.

According to the last census data taken in 2010, the district of Corozal was comprised of 30,061 Mestizos or 76% of the total population in the district. Throughout the visit, I interacted with the residents in a mix of Spanish and English or in the vernacular, known as Kriol. Additionally, a large majority of the students and teachers of Semilla Protestant School were of Mestizo origin, thus bi-cultural and bilingual. Instruction, at times conducted in Spanish, was mainly given in English.

Semilla is situated on a northern coast of Corozal district, a two-hour drive from Corozal Town. The roads leading to the village are remote and rudimentary dirt roads. One is required to take two ferries crossing cyan blue lagoons when traveling from Corozal Town to Semilla by car. By boat, one can arrive by water taxi in about 45 minutes, although the water taxi arrives and departs only once daily, thus limiting the mobility of the traveler. The village features two primary and secondary schools, numerous churches, two hotels, shops, and three preschools.

The second school observed was the Toucan Preschool in Belmopan, the capital of Belize, located two hours from Belize City. Belmopan is the second largest city in Belize. The population of Belmopan was 16,451 according to the Statistical Institute of Belize (2013). The surrounding community of the school selected there was working class, with the majority of parents working in the city.
Toucan Preschool was one of several preschools that served the neighborhoods in the city of Belmopan at the time of the study. Toucan Preschool was a stand-alone site not affiliated with an existing primary school and not religiously affiliated. There were approximately 35 students enrolled with two preschool classrooms in the school. The level one preschool classroom served 12 three to five-year-old children. The level two preschool classroom had a total enrollment of 23 students. The daily schedule was divided into morning and evening sessions. The school also provided before and after school care for children of working families. Of the 23 students enrolled in level two, 13 four to five-year-old children were enrolled in the morning session and 10 four to five-year-old students enrolled in the afternoon session. Each session lasted approximately three and one-half hours. The children were dropped off and picked up by their families, mainly by car. Children arrived with book bags containing their snack for the session, although some children remained on the school grounds and received a hot lunch after the morning session was completed. Half of the children enrolled were of the Mestizo ethnic origin and were Spanish speakers. The remaining students were Kriol, with two Asian students. The instruction was provided primarily in English and Spanish.

**Recruitment**

I began the study by contacting a randomly selected list of five preschool teachers in Belize through email. The list of preschool teachers was obtained from the Ministry of Education’s master list of preschools in Belize. Two teachers responded that they were unable to participate at that time. One teacher responded that the study would take place in a time frame that was unsuitable and could not participate. The two remaining teachers that responded to me within the following week with mutually agreeable availability were selected for participation in the study. The data
and findings presented in this study are specific to the context and experiences of each chosen teacher and the specific schools and classrooms of the two case studies.

The data and findings are suitable in allowing me to comment on the experiences of preschool teachers in specific communities in Belize according to the selected participants. The chosen method of analysis was open coding, where data was mined for similar themes, triangulated, and used to inform the research questions. The methods used allowed me to gain a view on specific practices that the selected teachers engaged in to prepare preschoolers for school and their beliefs about play in early childhood. Methods included observations, documents, materials and equipment examinations and analyses, which together with teachers’ oral reports, enabled this researcher to present information and commentary about barriers and facilitators of ECE practices and policies in the two sites.

**Study Participants**

The participants for this study were selected by a convenience sample based on timing and availability and consisted of two preschool teachers in Belize. The first teacher chosen is referred to as Mr. Cortés throughout the study. Mr. Cortés was a male at a primary school in a rural village in northern Belize, Corozal District. He was 27 years old at the time of the study and had taught in the preschool for four years.

Mr. Cortés had a diploma to teach in elementary education, but was uncertified to each early childhood education at the time of the study. He was working on a certificate program in early childhood education. He traveled to Orange Walk town where he attended classes at an institution of higher learning to complete the requirements for a bachelor’s degree in primary education with an endorsement in early childhood. He described the training he had received thus far as “pedagogy courses,” “philosophers,” and “how to teacher different subjects.” He did
mention that he was learning about educational theorists such as Piaget in his early childhood certificate program. He explained that courses he has taken have helped him to develop better organizational skills, such as planning lessons related to weekly themes within the yearly curriculum plan. He also mentioned that his coursework taught him how to use learning centers in the preschool classroom to supplement lessons. Mr. Cortés did not mention the use of developmentally appropriate practice.

He mentioned that while he is still receiving instruction in ECE he has not come across play studies or play pedagogy in coursework yet. Nevertheless, most of the exercises that he prepares for students do include fun, enjoyable activities, and play-based work. In Mr. Cortés's preschool classroom, he adopts a play-based approach to teaching and learning despite lacking formal training in doing so. He attributes his keen ability to work with children and capture their interests to his extensive years of experience working with small children primarily his time as a Sunday school teacher.

Collectively, the nation continues to struggle with increasing the number of trained teachers in ECE, an issue that continues on the agenda for education reform. According to Cook (2012), “It has been designated by the Ministry of Education that ECEDC, will be strengthened through several perspectives. First, to provide technical assistance and training to persons engaged in early childhood education programs country-wide” (p. 6).

The second teacher selected, Ms. Tuk, was a preschool teacher in an independent preschool center in Belmopan, the nation’s capital. She was trained and certified in elementary education from a local university. Ms. Tuk was 37 years old and taught preschool for twelve years. Ms. Tuk mentioned receiving coursework and attending workshops in play methods for preschool classrooms during discussions of her training. Ms. Tuk did not discuss specific knowledge and use
of educational theory in her teaching. She also did not discuss knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice.

By obtaining data from multiple participants, I gathered various meanings and explanations of play pedagogy and their experiences teaching in Belizean preschools, depending on the viewpoint of each participant. Case studies were generated using data from each participant as a means of limiting the data set and generating specific findings. According to Stake (2000), “Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 435). I chose to study preschool teachers that would provide individual perspectives on teaching in Belizean preschools.

Similarly, Yin (2003) illustrates that case studies are appropriate when attempting to highlight a contemporary event, a study focus that is descriptive in nature and one that is driven by a “how” or “why” question. This study’s data assist in describing the current environment of early childhood education and expansion in Belize during a specific period where educational reform seeks to ensure key outcomes. The study is also descriptive of a subset of key stakeholders in early childhood education in Belize. It aims to satisfy the “how” and “why” questions related to what preschool teachers explain as about their daily practice and what the influences on their experiences as educators might be.

Data Processing

Data was processed following the collection period depending on the methods. Interview transcripts were prepared immediately following audio-recording sessions. The participant observations recorded in the field notebook were charted and coded manually to check for patterns and similarities. The audio-recorded lessons and activities from site one and site two were used in
conjunction with the field notes to compile the vignettes. Photographs were sorted and selected according to their relevancy to the study themes and research questions (Glesne, 2011).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the data collection period and involved sorting and coding the data by themes, following thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). This research was a descriptive case study. As major themes of early childhood educational practices, play perceptions, and macro level influences emerged from the study data I commenced with tagging the interview data for similar and more specific descriptions of play perceptions and macro-level influences. In writing up the analysis of the data set I specified each participant of the interview and observations phase of data collection as a separate case to report the findings as a comprehensive study. Finally, observations of teacher/student interactions as well as diagrams of play spaces collected during the study were included in the final report as artifacts of the study.

Some considerations when coding and comparing case study data included: (1) whether themes that emerge are consistent across each case, (2) whether the themes that emerge serve to illuminate areas that are of particular challenge to these specific preschool teachers in the cultural context of Belize, and (3) whether the themes that emerge provide an understanding of macro-level influences on preschool teachers in Belize. I aimed to inform the overall research questions through the analysis of the study data. For the sake of clarity, I identified themes according to information that was significant, repetitive, emphasized or minimized from the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”
The themes that were generated from the data analysis phase were cross-referenced with the research questions to support overall findings.

The research data were shown to satisfy the research questions posed at the start of the study. Participants demonstrated how they used play in their daily practice, what they could and could not accomplish in their classroom based on outside factors and how macro-level influences shaped their day-to-day experiences in teaching. Participants also discussed what they believed about play, early educational practices and beliefs, and macro-level constraints to their profession. Data analyses involving all sources of information including field notes of observations and documents and photographs and so forth led to a set of six study themes, two conclusions and two suggestions generated from the overall findings of each case.

Validity

Constraints to the interview method of data collection include the ability to gain access to the participants and to establish relationships with contacts and the issue of validity and reliability. I established relationships with members of the community of the preschool she wished to work with and easily gained access to prekindergarten teachers within the area. Next, I reached out to the study participants via email, to make the initial connection and familiarize the participants with the goals and purposes of the study. Addressing validity in conducting qualitative research involves the use of strategies such as member checking and triangulation. A researcher uses member checking to involve the participants in the data analysis process on a regular basis.

A qualitative researcher works to establish themes and make meaning of the participants’ accounts by writing up an analysis of interview data. They meet with the participants to share the information they have gathered. Participants then have the opportunity to correct any misjudgments on my part in interpreting the data or explain a concept that was not fully developed
during the interviews. Triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods to gain a holistic grasp of the study question (Glesne, 2011). Using the multiple methods of interviews, observations, and artifacts triangulates this study and artifacts to further elucidate study findings. Observations served as in-vivo evidence of practices that served to explain the role of play in Belizean preschools. Interviews with the preschool teachers further explained the philosophies that they held regarding early childhood education and their desires for improving their practice. Understandings of the constraints and affordances of the educational climate in early childhood for the preschool teachers were illustrated during interviews as well.

Artifacts such as photographs and audio-recorded lessons added rich detail to the overall findings of the study. I aimed to use the same method but from multiple sources to arrive at a rounded view of my study concept. Reliability is more difficult to address when using qualitative research methods. I see interviews as a research method to be impossible to replicate as the nature of the human subject as a data source is highly variable. One person’s account of an event will vary from another’s, and this makes the data impossible to replicate. I also view interviews as a relevant source of data since an individual’s story will include many nuances and details that are unique to his/her lived experience. This aspect of qualitative research is both appealing to me and important to the social construction of knowledge.

**Rationale**

This study implemented the qualitative study design and research methods to provide appropriate data in relation to the research purpose. Qualitative methods were used to gather culturally specific data that ultimately aided in writing up the analysis. Field notes and participant observations provided evidence of cultural norms to provide as many examples of cultural practices in both settings. Analysis of the detailed interviews of study participant's experiences
within Belizean preschool education was used to gain a “thick description” of the concept of school readiness from the participant's viewpoint. Geertz (1973) posits the concept of thick description. This concept was developed to get the meaning behind the behaviors, gestures or words that are used by participants and involves a deeper understanding of these culturally specific actions.

The vignettes generated from the study data added a layer of perception and reflection to the study themes. Vignettes can be used to illustrate stories from the data set that will reinforce or challenge beliefs about a topic (Barton and Renold, 1999). In the stories presented, much of the teacher’s expressed notions and beliefs were demonstrated and confirmed. This provided added value to my study themes as evidence of satisfying the research questions.

By framing initial interview questions along the specified themes of the research purpose and questions, I hoped to elicit the types of responses that would inform the research questions and begin to frame an understanding of play perceptions of the preschool teachers and their accounts of teaching in Belize. I also reserved the option of asking further questions or modifying any questions prepared during the interview. It was anticipated that participants’ responses during interviews could lead to the exact information that I hoped to obtain and at other times the responses could lead to entirely different concepts and themes. It was important to explore any off-topic themes that emerged in the interviews as well by asking more questions. This would only be possible during a semi-structured or unstructured interview. Some questions were universal while some needed to be tailored to the individual participant. Sometimes rephrasing of interview questions was a more appropriate option while interviewing due to cultural differences or inferences and having that option was important to maintain the trust and respect of the participants. The use of semi-structured interviews informed this study by allowing the preschool teachers that are immersed in the phenomena to tell their stories. These lived experiences provide
a manner of viewing the phenomena from a personal perspective of those directly involved, making case studies a preferable design of delivery.

Interviewing using semi-structured interviews allowed me to delve fully into the phenomenon of daily experiences and play perceptions from the accounts of preschool teachers that are living the experience directly. Siedman (2012) explains the significance of this type of interview, “A phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 17). Collecting the individual experiences of each participant through interviews and follow-up interviews allows for the phenomenon in question to be fully examined from multiple perspectives. Siedman (2012) describes the interview data of participants as the “subjective understanding” of a phenomenon where each participant’s story provides a subjective account from their point of view. With such varied and inconsistent definitions of school readiness, the focus of this study was to collect a variety of accounts from participants directly related to the phenomenon of “school readiness” to generate a collective meaning based on the lived experiences of those directly involved.

Early childhood professionals that have been taught or trained in play pedagogy see play as a factor that contributes to a child’s growth and development. In the interviewing process, I included questions that would generate participant responses to the role of play in teaching preschoolers from the teachers’ perspectives. The interview script was also adapted to find out more about how the teachers were trained to gain an idea of where they were getting their perceptions of play in early education. These multiple angles of inquiry resulted in a multivariate description of the concept and a well-rounded understanding of play perceptions from the viewpoint of those involved.
Following analysis of these multiple perspectives the study findings, a discussion could take place that attempts to connect these varying conceptions of school readiness and play in early childhood education. Perhaps through a thorough discussion of each teacher’s perspective, the research would encourage an increase in opportunities for preschool teachers to become better trained in play pedagogy to create an environment for greater effectiveness in early education for all Belizean children.

Summary

To summarize, this study used semi-structured interviews, observations, vignettes, and photographs as the chosen methods of data generation directed towards obtaining a culturally specific view of the phenomena pertinent to the research questions. From the sociocultural perspective of knowledge and meaning as a social construct, I used interviews to find out how preschool teachers understand and use play in their teaching as well as to obtain evidence related to the macro-level influences on their teaching in specific cultural settings in Belize.

Through analysis of data I aimed to better understand the meanings of descriptions and uses of play as constructed by persons with a vested interest in the cultural specificity of childrearing and schooling of Belizean children, such as early childhood educators. This information can prove useful to Belizean preschool teachers and early childhood policy makers alike. Themes of both similarities and differences in play pedagogy in each social context can help to inform the conversation of the use of play in early childhood as a socially constructed concept that has instructional implications, but that also manifest differently against the cultural backdrop and interrelatedness of various families, communities, and schools. Furthermore, this study highlights key areas of success and suggestions for improvement to early childhood educational settings in Belize. Preschool teachers such as those represented in this study can benefit from
organized training, peer mentorship and classroom resources to be able to incorporate effective practices, including educational play, in their classrooms.

Next this dissertation presents the case studies generated for this research study.
CHAPTER FOUR

CASE STUDY ONE: MR. CORTÉS

This chapter presents results with discussion from case one. The chapter begins with setting descriptors followed by the data generated from study site one presented in the following order according to themes: (1) Cultural Learning, (2) Improvisation due to limited resources, and (3) Play benefits and supports. What is presented in these three sections are based on observational data, interview data and artifacts collected during the study. Observation data results and discussion begin with two vignettes from the study participant’s classroom, followed by highlights from my researcher observation notes. The interview data collected from Mr. Cortés, are analyzed. The interview phase of data collection at site one followed the initial observation of classroom practice. This afforded me with the opportunity to adapt the interview questions based on the instruction that was observed during the previous week.

Figure 4.1 Case One School Grounds
CASE ONE SETTING

Data collection began at the initial research site at Semilla Protestant School, located in Corozal, the northernmost district of Belize. This school was in the tiny coastal village of Semilla.

The school grounds of Semilla Protestant School, seen in Figure 4.1, contained two school buildings, pavilion, and snack kiosk. The Belizean flag waved from the flagpole in front of the main building. The primary school grade classrooms were contained in the painted building in the foreground. The building contained classrooms on the front as well as around the back, with the classroom doors facing outward. Grades Infant I through Standard VI (the United States equivalent of Kindergarten through seventh grade) were all housed in the same building. Class sizes were relatively small due to the population of school age children in the village and the school serving only a percentage of those school age children.

The open space in front of the school buildings provided space for outdoor whole group activities. The children in the photograph (see Figure 4.1) enjoyed running freely in the open space before the start of the school day. In the preschool, Mr. Cortés used this space to play whole-group games with the children. The space provided a venue for community events, such as “Conservation Day,” where families and neighboring schools gathered to share service learning projects, music, and performances. In addition, there is a designated preschool playground and elementary grades playground on the school grounds.

The time of the study marked the beginning of lobster fishing season nationwide. I discovered that most of the local men were fishermen and they were preparing to depart on the annual fishing trip out to sea, where they would remain for up to two weeks at a time. I observed several instances where the teacher’s interactions with the students involved either references to their father’s time away from home or the child seeking comfort or reassurance that their father
would be back soon. This was such a significant event that all the local churches prepared a celebratory feast on the beaches facing the open water as a going away party for the fishermen and their families. These celebrations were aimed at blessing the health, safety, and successful harvest for the fishermen.

I arrived at Semilla Protestant School on June 8, 2015, and spoke first with the assistant principal, explaining the purposes of my visit and then the lead preschool teacher, Mr. Cortés, who was busy preparing activities for the morning lesson. Mr. Cortes extended me a greeting, expecting the visit that was rearranged via email. He knew I was there to study Belizean preschool classrooms.

The Teacher and Students

Mr. Cortés was kind, friendly and welcoming towards me in their initial meeting. I was given a quick tour of the preschool playground and classroom before the school day began. Within a few moments, I was able to see Mr. Cortés’s pedagogy in practice as the morning session’s first arrivals began to trickle in. Interspersed between friendly greetings to parents and children walking in, I could witness Mr. Cortés’s interactions with the children while asking questions of how his preschool classroom, the only one in the school, is arranged and conducted. I took handwritten notes of all informal interviews in my notebook. Throughout the visit to Mr. Cortés's classroom, we engaged in these informal conversations in which he provided me with many important details about the school, the students, and his experiences as an early childhood educator in Belize. These conversations constituted informal interview data I recorded.

Mr. Cortés, who, as noted in chapter 3, did not have formal education in early childhood education, explained that the preschool class is a half-day program, offered twice a day in the morning and afternoon. The Belizean government provided a grant to fund the preschool the past
two years and as a result, parents are not charged a tuition rate, only a $5BZD ($2.50 USD) registration fee, and a $30BZD ($15USD) graduation free. Other costs associated with preschool attendance include the school supplies requested at the beginning of the school year, such as crayons and play-dough, and school uniforms, which is a yellow shirt with brown shorts or jumper, signifying the school colors. Preschool is not mandatory in Belize, but a truancy officer will monitor children enrolled. He explained that the cutoff date for enrollment is February 1. By then a child must be 5 years of age to start Infant I, the first grade in primary school, or he must attend preschool for another year (Informal interview, 6/10/2015).

The preschool class welcomed children ages three to five years. The majority of students attended the morning session with an enrollment of 31 students. The school day ran from 8:30 am through 11:30 am for the morning session and from 1:00-3:30 pm for the afternoon session. Mr. Cortés explained that although the instruction is largely the same in both sessions, he recommended to parents that the older preschool children, those that would turn five years old and graduate to Infant I the following year, enroll in the morning session and the younger preschoolers, mainly three-year-old and early fours, enroll in the afternoon session. As a result, the afternoon session was smaller and less rigorous than the morning session (Informal interview, 6/10/2015).

There was a total enrollment of 46 children in Mr. Cortés’s preschool class. Most students were enrolled in the morning session, geared toward students who were ready to move on to the first primary grade, Infant I. These students were four and five years of age. The remaining students enrolled were three years old or younger, four-year olds who attended the afternoon session, geared towards students just beginning preschool. Not all students enrolled attended each session since preschool was not mandatory. There was a total of 29 five-year olds, 10 four-year olds, and 6 three-year olds enrolled.
Students in Mr. Cortés’s classroom were of mixed ethnic backgrounds. Mestizo students made up the largest group with 89%. These spoke Spanish as their primary home language and were in various stages of acquiring English. The remaining ethnic groups were 8% Creole, 2% Maya, and 1% Asian. There were 26 girls and 19 boys. See Appendix H for a breakdown of demographics in Mr. Cortés’s preschool.

The Classroom Physical Environment

The preschool classroom in the Semilla Protestant School was situated on the left of the compound, across from the open space and pavilion, complete with a designated preschool playground on the side. There was a garden planted in front of the classroom, a class project completed with the assistance of the parents, according to Mr. Cortés. The classroom was divided into two rooms with the immediate room being the largest and the area of instruction. There were several child-sized tables joined together with to form a long table on one side of the room, the chalkboard and rug on the other side and Mr. Cortés’s desk in the corner. Dividing the two rooms on one side was the restroom and the other room contained the play learning centers, a sand station, and the kitchen/food preparation area on the other side of the room.

Figure 4.2 – Case One Preschool Classroom
The preschool classroom from within the room looking outward is shown in Figure 4.2. The classroom contains child-sized furniture and is arranged with several long tables joined together at one size of the room, with an open space in the center. The children’s parents designed the painted chairs shown, according to the child’s interests. In addition, parents planted a garden in the border directly outside the classroom door. Parents were welcome to visit and participate in classroom activities. In the morning and afternoon, parents congregated at the open windows shown, to observe the closing activities and to chat with one another, Mr. Cortés and/or his teacher assistant.

Mr. Cortés designed the wall art shown in the background. He explained that he regularly created posters or drawings to adorn the classroom that is related to his current theme or unit. Children’s artwork was hung along the opposite wall. The daily schedule is displayed near the door, the calendar and morning meeting space was arranged at the opposite wall and photographs of the Ministers of Education of Belize were hung on the wall near Mr. Cortés’ desk.

**The Classroom Social Environment**

By his own admission, Mr. Cortés explained that he was still learning about educational theorists such as Jean Piaget during his concurrent coursework towards his early childhood certificate. As such, he did not describe a firm knowledge of theoretical practices in his classroom teaching (Informal interview, 6/10/15). I was able to observe constructivist approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom. Calling such practices constructivist or by any technical or theoretical term was not explicitly mentioned by Mr. Cortés; and any testing for his depth of theoretical knowledge was not inquired during interviews. Mr. Cortés had a natural ability to understand young children through years of practice as a Sunday school teacher, elementary school
teacher, and as a parent. He allowed time for children to learn individually, socially, through various interactions with their peers, classroom materials, and his own teaching.

The preschool curriculum utilized was the national preschool curriculum dispersed by the Ministry of Education Pre-School Unit. All preschools in the country adopted and utilized typically with pretty good fidelity the same national preschool curriculum. The benefit was in the conformity of its use. All preschools would follow the same schedule of learning content and curricular goals. Students moving from one area of the country to another would benefit from having the same content taught in every preschool. A drawback of this curriculum was its heavily structured content. The curriculum book was divided into two parts: Preschool Level I and Preschool Level II. According to the content, students were to follow a prescribed list of learning goals for each unit. It was not permissible to move ahead of the scheduled content in either level. This posed a constraint for Mr. Cortés who described several children as advancing beyond the curriculum, yet he was not allowed permission to teach them beyond the content of the curriculum guide. This was a restraint that Mr. Cortés felt the need to resist as needed. (Formal Interview, 6/16/15).

Cultural learning in Mr. Cortés’s preschool

Data from case one illustrates cultural learning embedded in Mr. Cortés’s teaching practice. Cultural scripts, roles and embedded cultural learning are instantiated in teaching and learning intentions and actions that happened regularly in Mr. Cortés’s classroom. These data shed light on the enculturation of Belizean preschool children. Presentation, analyses, and interpretation of the case one evidence, informed by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Rogoff’s three planes theory and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), are in the service of answering the research questions of this dissertation. It is important to better understand
the sociocultural nature of the classroom, such Mr. Cortés’s, where children appropriated knowledge using cultural tools. Theoretical lenses are helpful.

The following vignette describes a lesson I observed in Mr. Cortés’s classroom, which illustrates how he imparts cultural knowledge to the children about Belize’s natural resources.

**Vignette 1.1 “No Elephants Here”**

It is a muggy, humid June morning in Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom. The gang’s all here, as in all thirty-one students have arrived for school this morning! This is a rare occasion. According to Mr. Cortés, all students enrolled are rarely in attendance at the same time.

The room is abuzz with activity. Noisy shouts of excitement, banging cups, crashing toys and the sound of Mr. Cortés’s voice booming over the cacophony of thirty-one tiny active bodies overtaking a rural Central American schoolroom overwhelm the senses. It is a loosely organized chaos.

Miraculously, Mr. Cortés has rounded up the group, asked each child to find a seat in an empty chair before him and begun the morning meeting. He has deliberately placed the little preschool chairs in a linear arrangement to begin preparing the children for the classroom setup they will find when they transition to Infant I in the fall.

The children all direct their attention to the front, save for a few boys in the back busy not keeping their hands to themselves and a few girls on the side, busy admiring one another's hairdos. Mr. Cortés begins by asking the children to recite the days of the week, to a special song with a familiar melody.

Next, he asks for volunteers, “Who can tell me what day it is?”

“No, yesterday was Tuesday, nice try. Who can help Diana? What day comes after Tuesday?” Mr. Cortés asks the group.

“Yes! Today is Wednesday!” Mr. Cortés responds enthusiastically.

Circle time is going remarkably well. Mr. Cortés moves on to the weather.

“Can anybody tell me what the weather is like today? Tricia, look out the window, what is the weather like today?”

Tricia looks out of the wide, wooden framed window open to the clear blue, sunny sky.

“It’s a sunny day today, teacher!” beams Tricia.

“Very good! Today is sunny, it is a sunny day today. All right, let’s sing a song about a sunny day.”

Mr. Cortés leads the group in song, one of his favorite activities to do with the children. They are familiar with this one and hold up both hands with fingers widely splayed to indicate a golden sun. Like a well-seasoned early childhood teacher, Mr. Cortés recognizes the moment when said boys in the back begin to display signs of rowdiness and transitions into a story.

“We are going to hear a story about a very special animal at the Belize zoo. His name is Tippy the Tapir. Everyone say, ‘Tippy the tapir.’”

Mr. Cortés is calm while several students excitedly shout that they have been to the Belize Zoo and seen the real Tippy the tapir. He waits for them to quiet.
“All right, let’s find out how Tippy the tapir got to the Belize Zoo.”
The children are patient and attentive as they listen to how Tippy the tapir got separated from his mother and rescued by a worker from the Zoo, who’d seen him wandering dangerously close to the roadside. As the story ended several students’ hands shot into the air.

“Teacher, what is the biggest animal?” asked Vernon.

“The biggest land animal in the world is an elephant, Vernon. But, there are no elephants here. In Belize, the biggest animal you will find is a tapir. They can grow to be 500 pounds. The tapir is the national animal of Belize.”
The room is met with “ooohs,” and “aahs,” as the children appear to be satisfied with that answer as indicated by the lack of prodding as to why Belize has no elephants.

**Enculturation**

Cultural learning is an integral part of the enculturation process. Although a large portion of cultural learning takes place in the family home, this process is continued and reinforced at the start of organized schooling. In Belize, preschool education is becoming a culturally accepted introduction to the start of formal schooling. Lessons, discussions, and storybook readings are all integrated areas of preschools where cultural information is shared and reinforced in the young mind.

Mr. Cortés explained that he does not teach specific units on Belizean culture to his preschoolers. Due to his adherence to the mandatory national preschool curriculum, however, he teaches them important aspects of Belizean culture throughout the school year. These aspects include the daily pledge to Belize, the names of the prime minister of Belize and the Minister of Education, and even things that make Belize unique—such as the national flower, bird, animal, and tree. These are all key cultural markers that Mr. Cortés regularly integrates into his daily teaching and conversations with the children.

Although learning about these cultural facts and symbols is not a specific part of the national preschool curriculum, Mr. Cortés teaches them because he believes that learning about the world surrounding them is an important part of identity and cultural formation. Rogoff’s three-plane theory applies to Mr. Cortés’ philosophy of teaching cultural knowledge in the preschool.
Rogoff comes to mind when he explained during the formal interview that he would rather teach specifics about what children might actually see in their own backyards as opposed to seemingly mythical experiences like snow or polar bears. In this respect, Mr. Cortés found it much more important for the children to learn about tapirs and jaguars than about polar bears and penguins. The children connect with the learning activities and reading materials much better when the content reflects their own culture as opposed to content that they will likely never see or experience firsthand. Mr. Cortés usually kept his teaching specific to the culture, close to home so to speak, in accord with principles of teaching in a developmentally and culturally appropriate method of practice (Hyun, 1998).

Mr. Cortés is giving the children an opportunity to appropriate this cultural knowledge. As they participate in the activities he plans and as children interact with him and peers, they become culturally grounded. Similarly, Mr. Cortés guides their participation in his cultural lessons. As he communicates with the children he imparts his knowledge and vocabulary related to the cultural elements he references. Mr. Cortés teaches the children the scientific names of the national plants and animals, and he also teaches them the colloquial names for each. These conversations provide children with valuable resources of cultural knowledge.

Mr. Cortés took the approach of teaching children specifically about the own cultures and in doing so he engages in the cultural teaching practice of enculturation. This is done both implicitly and explicitly, meaning that Mr. Cortés does it intentionally as well as unintentionally. The intentional aspect of his cultural teaching is to teach the children specifically about their Belizean communities. The unintentional aspect of his cultural teaching can be seen as the day to day modeling, direct instruction, and implicit knowledge that he imparts on the children about Belizean schooling. These signs, decorations, and posters shown in the environment, also known
as the “third teacher,” are the aspects of culture that are perceived by developing children but are not necessarily taught by adults.

Rogoff (2003) noted the cultural marker of competition evident in Caribbean nations such as Trinidad. A study she cited is of visitors’ participation in a museum visit that gave evidence which suggested that their competitive behavior is a demonstration of appropriate interactions in Trinidadian society. Since Belize shares much of its culture with nations of the Caribbean, this social interaction element was familiar to me. It is common within the Belizean schooling system, particularly due to high-stakes testing required for entry to secondary schooling, to see a high level of competitiveness among students. Culturally, this simply illustrates an appropriate level of interaction. In the vignette, Mr. Cortés asks for volunteers to share what the children know about the topic. Naturally, as one child shares, more children are encouraged to contribute their own similar stories. The competitive nature of student interaction begins to emerge in the preschool, although this was not regularly observed in all observations conducted in case one.

Mr. Cortés displayed the constructivist theoretical teaching philosophy in his practice where children construct their own learning through daily experiences. He prepared his environment to create experiences for children to engage learning centers tied into the weekly themes. The children were also given opportunities to work independently in line with specified learning goals.

During the interview, Mr. Cortés explained that children “learn” or “demonstrate” skills that are primarily academic such as “writing their names,” “saying their letters,” or “count to 10” (Formal interview, 6/16/15). There is a set of academic skills that should be mastered in preschool. The curriculum that Mr. Cortés used was to teach the children letters and numbers up to 10, as well as colors and shapes. The children also learn about the world around them and aspects of their
country as mentioned above--such as the national anthem, flag, and pledge of allegiance and so forth. The lessons and activities that Mr. Cortés arranges for the children each day come from the national curriculum and his observations of the children’s interests.

Mr. Cortés identified several skills and knowledge that he felt were most important in developing school readiness. These skills and knowledge were making friends, learning to be part of a group, that school is a place to learn, attaining early academics (letters, number, shapes, colors), and learning respect for teachers. The main areas that Mr. Cortés identified were either social/emotional or cognitive skills. He emphasizes some social skills such as learning to be part of a group and respecting the teachers as important to acclimating the child to the context of the school environment. Children who learn how to sit and pay attention during group instruction and learn how to listen to and respect their teachers are well prepared for formal schooling in Belize. Other areas of importance mentioned were making friends and academic skills for preschool. These areas are geared toward the content of what the children will be expected to do in school. Working well with others, making friends, and getting along well are important to a positive learning environment. Academic skills learned in preschool are the building blocks for later learning in the primary school years.

Certain aspects of the preschool classroom in Belize are organized based on mandates from the Ministry of Education. Those include the curriculum, the age limits of the children, the daily schedule and when to cover specific content. Mr. Cortés explained that at times he would like to modify the daily schedule, such as the afternoon sessions, to make the learning activities more adaptive to the class environment. The afternoon sessions cater mainly to younger preschoolers with a shorter attention span. Mr. Cortés said he would like to change some of the order by allowing the children opportunities to play more.
Mr. Cortés mentioned the fact that play is built into the daily schedule for their preschool classroom, as established by the Ministry of Education. Since play is embedded in the daily school day schedule, it is assumed that educators in the country value and encourage play in the early education of Belizean children. As the Ministry of Education mandated curriculum highlights, there is a need for both indoor and outdoor play and free, unstructured play as well as educational or teacher-led play in the early childhood classroom. As such, the program contained areas designated for free play as well as play centers where the children could engage in unstructured play during the time allotted for free play in the morning.

The children are given thirty to forty-five minutes of free play regularly scheduled into the morning and afternoon school sessions in preschool. According to Almon (2013), play is supported in an early childhood program when it is reflected in the daily schedule, “Schedule time for play every day. Ideal playtimes last 45 minutes or longer to give children a chance to enter deeply into play” (p. 15). This case study provides evidence that play was being supported in line with general DAP principles from the US.
The daily schedule is shown in Figure 4.3. Mr. Cortés displayed the daily schedule by the front entrance where it was easily visible (see Figure 4.3). The displayed schedule was not placed at the student’s height and did not indicate the time of day using symbols that the children could understand. Nevertheless, the children were familiar with the daily routine and knew what activities to expect throughout the school day.

The daily schedule was prepared by the Ministry of Education for all preschools to follow. Mr. Cortés expressed a desire to modify the schedule for younger children in order to match their developmental level of attentiveness. The Ministry evaluator explained that the schedule could not be changed for any reason during a recent program visit. Mr. Cortés found at times that the children were less interested or motivated in engaging in lessons and activities due to the time of day; but he could not rearrange the schedule as per the Ministry. In those moments Mr. Cortés mentioned that he would try to engage the children in a game that would still cover content, but that they would also find playful (Formal interview, 6/16/15).

The curriculum, also provided by the Ministry, is split into two years— one year for three and four-year olds and one for four and five-year olds. Mr. Cortés said that some of the content tends to be too easy for the children, especially once they reach five years old. So, he sometimes adapts the lessons to make them more challenging.

At times the children were asked to complete assignments both at and beyond the predetermined preschool level as set by the Ministry. Some children were fully competent at identifying letters and were moving beyond letter recognition to learning letter sounds and reading basic words. Mr. Cortés mentioned that the Ministry of Education’s early childhood division sets very basic skills at the preschool level, such as counting to 10 and learning the letters but not the sounds. He explained that by the end of the school year, many children are beyond identifying
letters and he feels it important to move them on to the next level of school, even if expectations at the next level are advanced for preschool according to the Ministry. He feels that children should not be made to feel “bored” in school; and so, he allows the children to learn new skills as needed.

As Mr. Cortés noted, the yearly plan for his preschool that coincided with the preschool curriculum guide, as shown in Figure 4.4. The Ministry of Education provided these resources. Mr. Cortés explained that he used this plan to teach the students according to themes and units. At any given time, all preschool teachers should be teaching the same content according to the yearly plan.

Mr. Cortés pointed out that the plan included the specific letters that should be taught throughout the school year (see Figure 4.4). As indicated in the plan and the curriculum, the Ministry did not want preschool teachers covering too much content. The breadth of the alphabet was to be taught between preschool and Infant I. As a result, the preschool year only covered a portion of the entire alphabet. Mr. Cortés did not agree with these suggestions and found it necessary to move on and cover more content so that his preschoolers would not become bored during their time in preschool.

Further, Mr. Cortés explained that the children receive snacks that are provided by parents either by sending them in their backpacks or purchasing them at the snack kiosk on the school
grounds. He mentioned that the snacks should be healthy and well-proportioned as recommended by the Ministry of Education. Healthy foods are encouraged to emphasize the need for adequate health and nutrition during the preschool years for growing children. He mentioned that he starts the school year by recommending that parents send in healthy snacks such as an orange or banana and in small portions yet as the school year wears on most children request favorite fast food snacks from the kiosk that are more like tiny meals such as tacos and chips.

The above elements of Mr. Cortés’s daily school schedule were influenced strongly by the Ministry of Education’s recommendations, yearly evaluation visits, and reform policies. Collectively, these mandates from the macrosystem can be viewed as having an influence on the microsystem of Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom, right down to the children enrolled. Some influences can be interpreted positively, with the incorporation of play in the daily schedule and clearly outlined instructional content in the curriculum. The negative constraints placed upon the early childhood classroom include the restrictive mandated curriculum by the Ministry of Education. This approach does not take into account the developmental learning of the young child and instead shows a heavy focus on academics at the expense of intellectual goals and constructivist methods that are recommended as more valuable to early childhood.

**Cultural Tools**

Within sociocultural and developmental theory, cultural tools are understood as methods and practices that are shared within a culture to ensure its survival and thriving. In modern times, cultural tools serve to provide an advantage to certain members of society. According to Vygotsky, cultural tools can be inherited by previous generations as well as adapted or changed by subsequent ones. In addition, current interpretations of sociocultural theory contend that individuals are active participants in shaping culture as opposed to being molded by it. This highlights individual agency
and differences as a primary source of information on cultures in addition to looking at society comprehensively.

The cultural tools that are often discussed are thoughts, language, and education. For this study, the cultural tools of language and early childhood education were used. In Mr. Cortés’s classroom, he engaged the children in both Spanish and English due to the ethnic composition of his students. This dual language process is an advantage for the children in his classroom that will be able to utilize both languages in Belize’s society. In addition, the early education that they are provided is laying a solid foundation for their subsequent schooling experience in the primary grades.

How much culture influences the early schooling of Belizean children? Based on this first case study’s observations, instruction was largely delivered in English despite the dominant language of Spanish spoken in the community. Mr. Cortés said that the classroom is bilingual, so instruction could be provided in both English and Spanish. The afternoon session that catered to the younger children was conducted mostly in Spanish. Songs and games were also sung in both languages in both the morning and afternoon sessions. Mr. Cortés mentioned instances where he would make learning specific to Belize:

“We try to focus only on Belize. For example, when we are talking about the weather I don’t mention, em – snow. It’s uh, we don’t mention, “It’s a snowy day!” No. Because we are- Not going to experience. Even though some chi-children, they see it on TV, they talk about it at home. Ah, they see pictures about it. But we don’t focus on that. We only focus here, uh, things about Belize. And also, when we are teaching about, em, transportation we have to tell them, we- I mention them about a train, but here in Belize there’s no train- So, ah, the air balloon- we have not- never seen an air balloon here. But I show them pictures, but we mostly focus on what we have, specifically in our village.” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

During the interview and observations, I witnessed that Mr. Cortés recognized and valued the connection between home and school for the children. During lessons, he would ask the children to think about the topic based on what they have seen and observed around them at home
and in the village. He asked many questions about their families. He also conversed with parents daily about the children and topics in general. Families are also an important part of special events and projects that take place throughout the year. Some projects, such as the class garden, building the playground and cultural events are attributed specifically to the volunteer work of parents of the preschool children. Mr. Cortés said that family participation is a large part of the success of the preschool throughout the year and his requests for help are always met with enthusiasm from parents happy to be involved in their child’s first school experience.

The participation of families was encouraged in Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom. Mr. Cortés also mentioned that knowing about the children’s family structure is also helpful to him in some cases. He said that the size of the village makes it easy for him to find out about the children’s background and what is happening in their lives. At the beginning of the year he held an orientation and took an inventory of the class where he asked information about the families:

“When they are going to register in preschool we give them a form. We give them a form. But that is not so much in detail. Just like for example, the job of the mother, the job of the dad. How many, em, members are in their family. If he has a sickness or something like that. And the, the thing here is that the village is small, and we know things that happen, and we know their background. I, well I, know the background of the different children. And it affects them a lot. And it affect- there are different problems that families encounter that when they- the child comes to school, you can see how it affects them” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

This information helped him to plan better experiences for the children and to discuss the differences in family structures for children who do not have traditional families with a mother or father. He mentioned that if he knows a child does not have a mother or father in the home he will adapt projects like Mother’s Day or Father’s Day crafts to be written to the primary caregiver in the home.

In corroboration, at times during the interview and from observations evidence of instances concerning communication with parents was revealed. I observed the many opportunities that Mr.
Cortés afforded parents opportunities to conference with him at their convenience. There were many opportunities at drop-off time in the morning and pick up time in the afternoon for Mr. Cortés to converse with parents. I also asked questions about his views on parent involvement and communication methods. He exhorted the importance of staying in close communication with families not only on the progress of the children but on the class happenings and expectations of the school.

Noteworthy are these data pointing to the importance of starting the school year with an orientation for families to hear what they can expect their children to learn in preschool and how they as parents can stay informed. He explained that he is able to meet the needs and expectations of the children and their parents by communicating with them regularly and sharing tips and strategies to help keep their preschoolers on track. Regarding play, Mr. Cortés explained that he shares the importance of learning through play with families from the very beginning so that they are not surprised when they stop by and observe the children playing games or with toys because they are meeting important learning goals through these activities.

Of course, the interaction between families and the teacher are what make up the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s theory. This interaction is seen in communication between the parent and teacher through notes, conversations, and conferences. Mr. Cortés displayed many examples of family interaction. Family engagement is a large part of the success of many quality early childhood education providers (Olsen & Fuller, 2012). Communication between families and teachers can be positive or negative at time. Mr. Cortés shared only positive feedback on the engagement he has with the families he serves. These relationships serve to influence the children in Mr. Cortés’s classroom positively as a result.
The interaction between the teacher and the parents for the benefit of the child also reminds one of Rogoff’s three planes theory. This important model stresses the need for interpersonal relations within a culture to shape the child’s development. The three models of apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation are simultaneously at work within cultural formations of the individual and their cultural interactions. The interactions described by Mr. Cortés with the parents ultimately influence the child and impart the knowledge of appropriate interactions between the home and school.

Some songs that Mr. Cortés led for the children to sing had religious themes. The preschool is affiliated with the community church and serves the families that attend the church. Mr. Cortés mentioned that it is permissible to include religious references, symbols, and themes in his teaching. During observations, religious references were seen in the daily prayer that the children recited to start their day, the songs that the children sang during circle and the prayer that was said before the start of snack time. This represents guided participation as a cultural learning tool and a form of interaction discussion by Rogoff’s three planes theory. As teachers lead children through these religious songs during routine times in the school day, they are imparting the cultural knowledge that prayers and religious songs should be practiced at these appropriate times. In addition, as children adopt these behaviors they are likely to repeat them as participatory appropriation. They participate in these learning experiences and appropriate them as part of their understandings of their roles within Belizean culture.
Table 4.1 Religious Songs in Circle Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mr. Cortés</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Contextual Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our Father, who art in Heaven, we ask your blessing upon each one of us.</td>
<td>Children recite together with Mr. Cortés</td>
<td>Children participate in morning prayer led by Mr. Cortés</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bless our family at home, bless my daddy and mommy, Bless my teachers, too. Bless everybody, dear Lord!</td>
<td>Amen!</td>
<td>Children know how to end prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a sunflower, that follows every moment of the sun, so I turn towards you, to follow you my God. Like a sunflower, that follows every moment of the sun, so I turn towards you, to follow you my God.</td>
<td>Good morning, Teacher! Good morning class!</td>
<td>Children are trained to say good morning to their teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good morning, Teacher! Good morning class!</td>
<td>The children and teacher sing the song that features elements of nature and religious symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Song teaches children to follow God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Song features movement: children pretend to be a tall sunflower leaning towards sun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 shows the religious songs that were sung by the children during circle time sessions. Some key aspects of religiosity expressed during this activity were the prayer, the songs, and the symbols mentioned in each. During the prayer, the children prayed to their “Father” in “Heaven.” These are common symbols in Christianity that refer to the Judeo-Christian God. They also prayed for themselves, their families, and their teachers. The children know to end their prayer with a shout of “Amen!” During the songs, the children sang and participating in the movement. The songs they sang included some symbols of Christianity such as “following God,” “being with
God,” and “appreciating all that God has made on Earth.” Children adopt the behaviors modeled by adults through watching and learning, participating, and repeating. These behaviors encompass the “mutual embeddedness” of Rogoff’s three planes: apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation (Rogoff, 1995). The children enter into the apprenticeship role naturally by watching what teachers are doing and saying and practicing inwardly and outwardly. They enter the apprenticeship as they learn the key tenets of their cultural beliefs. In this case, religious practices play a strong role in their educational environments. The children learn to appreciate religious references in the preschool and participate, then later repeat, and appropriate these ideals.

Mr. Cortés Improvises Due to Limited Resources

Reusable Materials

The following vignette describes a discussion I observed in which Mr. Cortés engages the children in a discussion on the topic of conservation and protecting Belize’s natural resources.

Vignette 1.2 “M” is for Mangrove”

Mr. Cortés has been working for the past week with the Infant I teacher, Ms. Gloria, to decide on room arrangements and learning goals that could be incorporated in the classroom for the upcoming, “Conservation Day” festivities. Semilla Protestant School would be hosting the event, where all area preschool, primary, and high schools will meet to display student work, share music and performances, and listen to guest speakers discuss the topic of conservation. This year’s theme would be “Preserving the Mangroves.”

Mr. Cortés explains that the preschool is asked to participate in all the school-wide activities and he regularly meets with the Infant I teacher to collaborate on ideas. This event is a great opportunity to have the children learn more about Belize’s natural resources, engage the school community, and begin the process of transitioning to the first year of formal schooling.

The projects featured in the outdoor displays involved creating a visual display that would address the event theme and required utilizing reusable materials. Mr. Cortés and Ms. Gloria agreed to incorporate elements of a mangrove into their existing learning centers using props and reusable materials.

Mr. Cortés chooses to place a large, inflatable shark over the dramatic play center. He replaces the green background paper on a nearby display board with posters of underwater creatures and coral. He places props such as branches, leaves, and twine in several bowls on the tables to create small learning centers for the children to create their own mangroves. Ms. Gloria
has given him some tiny replica toys of sea creatures to put in his sand bin for the children to play with during free play.

“We regularly change out the centers according to what we want to teach,” Mr. Cortés explains. “We want the children to feel stimulated while they are here. We don’t have much to work with, so I try to be creative. And we share toys between the classrooms often.”

Later, Mr. Cortés implements his daily lessons, using the conservation theme.

“Today we will learn about the mangroves,” he begins, “who knows what is the mangroves? ¿Quién sabe qué son los manglares?”

Veira raises her hand.

“Yes, Veira?” replies Mr. Cortés.

“Mangrove is a swamp, no, teacher? My ma say it is lone swamp in deh.”

“Mangroves are not only swamps, they are like underwater forests!” Mr. Cortés explains, “But they are special forests, we have to protect them.”

Part of the unit on conservation is to teach the children how to protect the mangroves, an important part of Belize’s ecosystem.

“Anyone here know any fishermen?” asks Mr. Cortés.

He knows this question will elicit an enthusiastic response. Most of the village’s men work as fishermen, so most of the children’s fathers or someone they know engages in this line of work. With lobster season just beginning, many of the local fisherman have gone out to sea for several weeks to harvest lobster for sale.

All the children’s hands shoot into the air, as promised. Mr. Cortés calls on Anthony, a Mestizo boy.

“My pa and my uncle gone fishing.”

“Right. Well, the reason I say that is because fishermen have to be very careful driving their boats in areas with thick mangroves. Especially in motorboats, the propellers can cut and damage them if they are not careful. Does anyone know another reason we should protect the mangroves?”

This question is met with silence.

“What lives in the mangroves, do you know?”

The children are thinking. Some look skyward, others place their fingers to their mouths, others begin to raise their hands tentatively.

“Who can tell me an animal you think lives in the mangroves?” Mr. Cortés encourages the group.

Anthony’s hand shoots up again. “Ooh, teacher, I mih see a white bird in deh one time.”

“Yes, lots of birds live in the mangroves. What else?”

“Um, fish?” Veira calls out.

“Fish, yes, fish and lobsters can hide in the branches below the water. What about— who has seen a manatee?”

“Ooh, ooh, me teacher, I mih see one!” Joshua exclaims.

“Me, too, teacher,” adds James.

The class whispers excitedly.

“The manatee is a special animal to Belize. We sometimes call it a sea cow. They also hide in the mangroves. They can be hard to see, and boats can cut and harm them as well. So, we must be careful to protect the plants and animals that live in the mangroves.”

“Let’s see, we have two new words here that start with the same letter. We have ‘Mmm, mmm, mangrove.’ And we have ‘Mmm, mmm, manatee.’”
In vignette 1.2, the children are taught about conservation, the topic of the upcoming community-wide event to be held at Semilla Protestant School. The children are curious to know more about the topic. Mr. Cortés has presented the topic to the children in a developmentally appropriate manner. Through careful questioning, he can engage the children in a conversation about protecting their environments in a clear and relatable approach.

The children know enough about individual aspects of the overall topic of conservation in order to participate in the discussion. Mr. Cortés relates the topic to the children’s prior knowledge by asking them questions about a familiar topic: animals. He calls on several students who help him guide the conversation. The topic is also relevant to their daily lives at home as many children have fisherman in their families. It is welcoming and exciting for children to connect their home and school lives. They feel competent in their learning environments when they can contribute to important conversations. Mr. Cortés has taken the time to learn about each student and their family. He knows the questions he can ask or suggestions he can make to generate rich responses from his students.

Even though the children are only four and five years old, Mr. Cortés believes it is important to engage them in challenging conversations. They may not fully grasp the concept of protecting the environment in which they live, for example, but they do know enough to discuss things that they have seen and have experienced. Mr. Cortés shows respect for young children when he engages them in these conversations. He teaches them how to recall experiences and stories, use vocabulary words they have learned, and how to be a part of a group.

Lastly, Mr. Cortés is imparting pertinent cultural knowledge on the children through guided participation in this discussion. The children are growing and learning within their communities, but they must still be taught about their world. This also constitutes participatory appropriation
according to Rogoff’s three planes theory (1995). Mr. Cortés takes the time to teach them that they live in a region with a unique ecosystem. He teaches them that as humans, it is our job to protect the habitats and wildlife that share our communities. These lessons are best taught the children when they are young to appropriate the information into their understanding of their roles within their community. Rogoff explains:

> With guided participation as the interpersonal process through which people are involved in sociocultural activity, participatory appropriation is the personal process by which, through engagement in an activity, individuals change and handle a later situation in ways prepared by their own participation in the previous situation. (p. 3)

The children will likely remember these instructions when they encounter a similar lesson or situation due to this discussion. Mr. Cortés has done his part to include his preschoolers in the school-wide event for the primary and secondary grades where their service learning projects on conservation are showcased. This way, the children can participate and understand the purpose of the event.

**Outdoor Play**

The children went outside for outdoor play at the adjacent playground daily. With two swings and one slide for a group of over twenty children, the small playground quickly became overwhelmed by the children’s raucous and energetic play. Teachers stood close watching over the children. Most children learned to play safely and cooperatively but the inevitable challenges occurred such as when one child began to clamor for a turn on the swing while the other was not yet ready to give up a turn. When too much conflict arose over the limited playground equipment outdoor play soon came to an end.
Volunteers including parents, teachers, and members of the community built the playground structure (see Figure 4.5). The entire preschool class shared the playground space during outdoor play. Two swings are to the right of the main structure, and two swings at the left. The structure was made of recycled materials; and the space below the slide and swings was filled with sand. Teachers stood under the small pavilion to the left and supervised the children as they played. The small playground space became crowded on days where as many as 25 students arrived for school during the morning session. Inevitably, many children argued over taking turns on the limited swings and slides. Teachers did not typically intervene but allowed children to negotiate use of the play space.

Although existing in the classroom the lack of an established teacher/child ratio constrained teaching in this outdoor preschool setting. The teachers maintained an observational role during the playground active play session; but it was clear that the infrastructure of the playground was not equipped to handle the number of children present. Mr. Cortés mentioned that the number of children enrolling in the preschool had steadily increased over the years. At one time, the playground was sufficient for the smaller group of children. At the time of this dissertation research, it was simply too small for his burgeoning preschool class. Additionally, the
disproportionate number of children to teachers showed that the ratio was insufficient to effectively manage all the children at once. When the children inevitably got into a quarrel about taking turns on the swings, teachers needed to step in to establish order. With so many little bodies running around, there were certainly some tense moments observed (Field Notes, 6/14/15, 6/16/15). The teachers stood by and did their best to guide the children; but it was evident that a closer look at student/teacher ratios could benefit the strains associated with management of increasing enrollment in the preschool.

Mr. Cortés and his teacher's aide maintained a close watch on the outdoor play on the playground but did not intervene during children’s play. Sometimes Mr. Cortés gathered the children after a 25-minute period on the playground and led them in traditional ring games out in the courtyard, in addition to or in lieu of playground time. These ring games included follow the leader and “Good morning, Miss Lady.”

Another time the children completed a learning activity where they were asked to identify a color and color a picture of a mouse with crayons (Field Notes, 6/10/15). They also wrote their names three times on guided writing pages, reflective of the goal for all preschool children to write their names legibly before primary school, Mr. Cortés says. Finally, they listened to a story called, “Mouse Paint,” before packing up to head home. Parents were already beginning to appear in the open windows of the classroom and quietly observed their children at work. They also used this time to converse with the teacher about topics of importance or related to the school schedule. In this case, the parents had questions about the upcoming preschool graduation.
Play Benefits and Supports in Mr. Cortés’s Classroom

Bilingual Songs

Circle time in Mr. Cortés's classroom was filled with song and movement. The children were familiar with this time and participated with enthusiasm, singing, and moving together to their favorite songs. The songs included common preschool themes that teach repetition, rhyme, alliteration, and other phonological awareness skills. They also incorporated movement of the body with finger play, gross motor movement of the arms or legs and social interaction with their classmates. The songs included familiar aspects of nature around the children with flowers, rainbows, clouds and the sun and rain as key components.

The inclusion of English and Spanish songs was evident during circle time activities 95% of the time in Mr. Cortés's classroom. He explained that instruction could be done in either English or Spanish, which makes his classroom bilingual essentially. This was particularly helpful for children that spoke primarily Spanish in the home and needed to learn English in school. Yet, he explained further that he wanted to begin transitioning instruction to mainly English since it was the end of the school year. In primary school, the instruction would be done mostly in English and he wanted the children to hear and understand English efficiently. Throughout the school day he often spoke in both languages to Spanish-speaking children to gain their attention and teach them the English form of his commands. The following example shows Mr. Cortés leading the children in morning meeting activities in both English and Spanish:

Mr. Cortés: Good-

Children: Good morning, Teacher! Good Morning class! (Children speak and shout unintelligibly)

Mr. Cortés: Okay, sit down, we are sitting now. Marvin, sit. Let’s sing, “Good morning to you!” One, two, three-
Children & Mr. Cortés (singing and clapping in rhythm to “Happy Birthday, to You”:
Good morning to you! Good morning to you! Good morning, good morning, good
morning to you! ¡Buenos días a usted, buenos días a usted, buenos días, buenos días,
buenos días a usted!
  (New song, children sing and act out lyrics)
Way up in the sky, the little birds fly, way down in her nest, the little bird rests. With a
wing on the left and a wing on the right, the little birds sleep, all through the night.

Mr. Cortés: Shhh! Sleeping…(Shouts) The sun comes up! The dew comes down.

Children & Mr. Cortés: Good morning, good morning, the little birds say.

Mr. Cortés: Very good. Let’s sing now, “Like a sunflower.” Like a sunflower…Zach,
canta con nosotros. We will do the sunflower. Stand up straight, Zach, Blaine, Giovanni.
Ok. Like a sunflower. One, two, three.
(Field notes, 6/18/15)

This activity featured English songs and instruction as well as Spanish songs and
instruction. The movement from one language to another served the function of practicality so that
the children Mr. Cortés identified as primarily Spanish speakers can participate and understand his
instruction. He also wanted the children to become familiar with English language instruction,
particularly for the children that were still learning English. As an added benefit, the children are
becoming more skilled bilingual learners in the dual language preschool.

**Scaffolding and ZPD**

Mr. Cortés used scaffolding with the children when he provided supports in a flexible
manner that helped them acquire new knowledge or begin to understand concepts. Examples
provided below include the use of toys and props, accessing prior knowledge and language play.
Mr. Cortés would work to provide instruction within the zone of proximal development of the
children by teaching them just beyond what they have acquired. It is understood that Mr. Cortés
felt limited in this practice due to the instructions of the Ministry and the curriculum he is provided.
Mr. Cortés mentioned his frustration with this restriction during the interview. This aspect of his
classroom teaching stands out as a constraint set forth by the Ministry.
Mr. Cortés prepared lessons based on themes and used features of the classroom’s physical environment as extensions of the lessons by adding materials such as posters, toys, props, and signs that aided in supplementing the overall theme. Almon (2013) explains that it is necessary to create an environment that is inviting and conducive to play for children in preschool, “Create beautiful play environments, indoors and outdoors. Equip them with simple, open-ended play materials, but avoid clutter and overstimulation” (p. 15). Mr. Cortés created an environment that the children enjoy moving about because it was inviting, spacious and clean. The classroom contained colorful drawings, educational posters that Mr. Cortés mentioned he created himself, and student artwork. The classroom library was sparse but contained a good selection of age-appropriate and child-friendly books. The cultural elements of the classroom included posters of the Prime Minister of Belize and the Minister of Education, the Belizean flag, and pictures of Belizean national symbols, such as the flower, tree, animal, and bird.

Play based learning is any activity disguised as play but that serves the dual function of an enjoyable activity and a learning activity. In other words, a lesson or activity that makes learning fun. This notion is something that Mr. Cortés captures during his time with the students.

“…If we are going to teach about the numbers, we need to do something with the number ten. We need to sing, a song with the number ten we need to do different activities using the number ten: counting, em, trying to form the number in the air, then trace it, then, em, eventually they are going to learn to write it free-handedly. And, try to involve an activity that they are going to be moving around. For example, “Bring me ten cups.” They are going to bring it. ‘Bring me ten exercise books.’ They are going to bring it. ‘Find me…’ And you use all the numbers, not only the number ten, but you reach up to ten” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

His explanation of the kinds of activities that he has the children doing shows that he understands the need to get the children to both understand the concept of number, or the one-to-one correspondence, the symbol of number, by drawing it in the air and the all-important aspect of getting the children up and moving. By having them get up and find him ten objects it is an easy
formative assessment, the children are engaged in learning, they are scaffolding one another in play by working together to find ten objects and they are enjoying learning about the number ten.

A play-based lesson is instruction provided by a teacher through play. Play-based learning can occur at any time and sometimes does not require a teacher to guide the children. Mr. Cortés described instances where children are reinforcing the learning that may have previously taken place through their subsequent play interactions:

“They are playing, with ah - I can bring a puzzle for them. They can be fixing that puzzle they are playing, but they are learning something. When they’re finished that puzzle, they’re going to see something that we are going to be talking about, on that, about, on that day. Em, also the ABC, we can bring a puzzle, biig puzzle, each one get a piece of the puzzle and everyone become, [they are playing at that time!], they’re playing but we are learning our ABC and putting the ABC together.” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

Mr. Cortés described here that at times the children may be engaging learning material through play and not realizing that they are learning. For children, the enjoyment of play enables them to keep returning to activities that will solidify learning objectives.

During observations, Mr. Cortés used play-based instructional methods such as teacher-led indoor and outdoor games, song, rhymes, and finger plays, and academically enriched play centers daily numerous times. During teacher-led games Mr. Cortés stood in front of the children and led them through a game of “Simon Says,” for example, and showed improvisational skills by making up a game for children to practice and demonstrate their knowledge of colors and numbers. The children were asked to get up and go find an object of a particular color of Mr. Cortés’ choosing, or to bring the correct number of objects that Mr. Cortés asked from the play centers. These games require a child’s recall of information, self-regulation skills and are engaging.

The songs and finger plays were a series of familiar songs and rhymes the children knew the words and movements to. The children were able to practice rhyme, repetition and recall through the songs Mr. Cortés led. In the academically enriched learning centers, Mr. Cortés
prepared areas where children could play independently or with classmates. The areas were clearly labeled, with props and pictures placed on the walls according to the chosen theme of, “Under the sea.” Pictures of ocean life and beaches were placed in each center along with words labeling the pictures to promote environment print literacy. There was a large, inflatable whale hung overhead, and a pool filled with sand and shells, in addition to small ocean animal replica toys for children to enjoy sand play. Other centers included a writing center with blank paper, coloring pages, crayons and pencils and alphabet, number and color charts lining the wall. Dramatic play was one of the centers where Mr. Cortés placed items for children to pretend they were at the beach or diving underwater.

In Mr. Cortés’s classroom the children were seen engaging in behaviors that mirror the lessons that they had learned that week on three occasions on three occasions (Field Notes, 6/12/15). In many regards the children appeared to enjoy “playing teacher” with one another and take turns assuming the role of teacher and learner. Mr. Cortés described an instance where he could observe the children playing this game and make assessments of their knowledge. In one instance, he observed a group of children going over their colors and using some color charts on the wall to “teach” one another:

“Some of them, they think that they will act as the teacher. And they will be telling you, ‘Ehh, tell me what is this color?’ and the others are telling them – that color is blue, that color is red. And you can see that, the- you can see that they are learning their colors. Or ‘Bring me…em, bring me two books!,’ one will say the other will go get and will bring the two books. You can see that they are learning they’re numbers also from there. Or! If you put, your, your, your, charts on the wall your, your charts on your walls there will be a point that they will go on that chart and they will say, they will be saying by themselves. They are going to be saying it or will ask others to tell them, ‘What is this?’ ‘What is this?’ And the other will be telling. So, they are, they learn, they learn a lot.”
(Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)
In this description Mr. Cortés sees that the children are enjoying their game of “teacher,” but they are also demonstrating what they know or have learned thus far through play.

For the preschool years, Mr. Cortés mentioned that social skills are some of the most important learning goals he tries to fulfill. The preschool setting provides some children with the perfect context to try new skills and adapt to a community-based learning environment for the first time. Family structure also affects the child’s need to enhance these skills. Mr. Cortés shared that only children sometimes struggle most with developing social skills:

“They don’t want to play with others. And that is a, em, strong point that we try to do here in preschool. For them to socialize with each other. We try to teach them how to do this. And yes, I am going to get close to him and I will tell him, ‘Go and play with him, he will share with you, don’t be by yourself. Try to be with others.’ And eventually, they’re going to start to play with…one friend, two friends, then they’re going to start playing with other friends here in, in the preschool.” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

As Mr. Cortés emphasized, developing social skills is a critical component to school readiness in addition to self-regulation, taking turns, following directions and other aspects of executive function.

Supporting the need to encourage social skills is using an integrated approach to the curriculum. Mr. Cortés mentioned that he tries to encourage these skills specifically, but that socialization is integrated into the lessons throughout the school day. When he asks students to bring ten objects, he asks them to do so together. He also tries to ensure that the children are having a positive experience in preschool:

“I think it goes, it goes hand in hand with our daily, our daily time here in school. You can, because you, you will see the child, you will see the, he behaves or she behaves. And you will try to, to mend their behavior. If their…or if they’re feeling afraid you need to find why they’re feeling are afraid. And you need to tell their parents. If their parents are doing something wrong at home, you need to tell them. Because you, here in pres- I think that, that children, eh, there, you can see the different attitude that the child comes to school. A child should be happy, I think that they should be happy all the time.” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)
As Mr. Cortés showed, social and emotional development can and should be a concern of early childhood teachers. He is concerned about the emotional state of the children and strives to make their experiences good ones. He does so through positive guidance and modeling good behaviors for the children.

I observed the level of teacher interactions with the children noting that free play mostly involved the children finding toys and games in the room opposite the classroom and finding playmates amongst their peers. The teacher spent this time observing children, assisting those that need help or preparing for the lessons. Mr. Cortés mentioned that he sees his role as the teacher during free play as a guide or helper and most other times he spends watching and observing the children. The lack of interaction on the teacher’s part was evident but not analyzed as a cultural marker. During the interview, I asked if teachers were discouraged from playing with the students, and whether this was a cultural distinction. He responded that teachers were not discouraged from playing with children and it was not a known signifier of cultural behavior on the part of teachers.

Mr. Cortés mentioned that the takes great care to make the environment of the classroom friendly and fun for the children. He also views his relationship with the students as a caregiver, mentor, and friend as well as their teacher. As he mentioned the children develop social skills through interacting with their peers but also through watching him as he models good behaviors. Mr. Cortés takes care in listening to the children, calming them and reassuring them, teaching them new skills, laughing with them and playing with them. This interaction between the teacher and the children builds a bond and a relationship that is important to establish positive images of teachers in the young child’s mind. This also teaches the children that they can trust and confide in their teachers and count on them to see their needs met.
Highlights of my visit to Mr. Cortés’s classroom are included in Table 4.2 shown below. The aspects of Mr. Cortés’s teaching methods that were the most interesting are included in the table. First, Mr. Cortés incorporated praise throughout his lessons and instruction with the children. He even used phrases that were witty and whimsical to praise the children. He did the “*Fabuloso*” movement during lessons when a child produced the correct response. Pretending to spray the air and saying, “*Fabuloso, fabuloso,*” while wiping the air with an imaginary cloth is a reference to the popular, fragrant Mexican cleaning product, *Fabuloso,* that many Latino mothers clean their houses with (Field Notes, 6/14/15). This is both a praise element and a cultural reference that is fun for kids to use and encourages them to congratulate one another. It was also delightful to see the room full of preschoolers complete the motions of this praise activity to support their classmates. Mr. Cortés’ use of praise in his classroom is a positive indicator of the rapport he establishes with his students. The friendly and supportive environment of Mr. Cortés classroom was a highlight of the microsystem influence he has established with his preschoolers. This is seen as an affordance of the preschool in this case study and a positive sign of behaviors that encourage healthy growth and development of these young children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2 Observations of Mr. Cortés's Instructional Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher notes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Praise He taught the children how to praise one another using cute rhymes: (pretend to spray, 2X, wipe air with imaginary cloth) ¡<em>Fabuloso, Faboloso!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Teaching He is thorough and develops good meaningful lessons for the children. Very organized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Creativity He is very creative, innovative, And artistic. He designed and drew, most of the art in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Planning He is very organized and plan ahead of time, he begins the transition process for his children going to Infant I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Songs He sang many familiar songs in English and Spanish with the children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Play Supports

Mr. Cortés described that in his classroom play is not only encouraged during the daily schedule for free play in centers and outdoor play on the playground but also throughout the daily lessons. In his words,

I think that we play…more than that. Because during the, the lessons…we’re not going to be just sitting. They’re going to be doing some activity that might be considered playing. (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

By this statement, Mr. Cortés seems to recognize that in a preschool classroom the very foundation of learning and growth is play. Although there is allotted time set aside for children to explore and play on their own, there is also time scheduled for children to learn as a group through educational play. With the basis behind all activities grounded in play, the children are allowed to learn and explore their world in a context that is accessible to their developmental understanding.

In this respect, the use of play as the context or medium for development and learning gestures to Piaget's theory of individual constructivist learning where the child consolidates or assimilates by playing. Similarly, there are hints of Vygotsky’s theory featuring zone of proximal development; this is witnessed in any preschool classroom that places play at the center of the daily schedule. Vygotsky touted play as an important part of the development of language and social skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). An integral part of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory is that he posits that children learn through social interactions. Taking this theory as step further, the playmate can serve as a scaffold to push the child through his or her zone of proximal development or the play activity itself can also provide this element of scaffolding. Either way, play is an important experience to a child's development, and learning. Implicitly if not formally Mr. Cortes seemed to know this.
Summary

Observations of Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom were at times very reminiscent of observations I conducted in preschool classrooms in the United States. There was a set schedule posted on the wall that guides the flow of the morning and makes sense of the activities that were observed. Play was integrated into many of the activities that are scheduled and planned for the children throughout the morning. Activities were also age-appropriate and aimed to encourage practice in skills that would be important to the children's subsequent experiences in early schooling beyond Mr. Cortés's classroom. As evidenced in this rural preschool, play provided the context for children to practice the skills they will need to develop physical, social and cognitive skills that are important for school success. Learning through play in preschool allows children the developmentally appropriate path to school readiness skills.

From the interview and observations of Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom I often saw or heard that children were receiving direct instruction that is appropriate for their age and stage of development, that is implemented in a context that is engaging and accessible, that is culturally relevant, and that is critical in meeting the social/emotional as well as cognitive learning skills that are important to school readiness. Parental involvement was also evidenced in Mr. Cortés's preschool classroom; there was evidence that he was able to tout a high level of interest and participation from parents and families.

The rural setting of this preschool made for an interesting observation in how local Belizeans view the importance of school even at the very initial stages of ECE in their country. Parents and family participation at the preschool graduation alone was impressive and served to drive home the point that Belizean families in even rural settings value and support preschool education.
Commentary

In case one there were many instances of cultural learning practices and evidence of affordances of teaching in this Belizean preschool. There were also examples of constraints, such as limited resources and teacher knowledge and skills. Play was an important to the teacher and practiced in various forms. The teacher did not describe the concerted use of educational theory in his practice. This was not among my line of questioning but raises questions about how much the teacher knew or understood about early childhood educational theory. The teacher nevertheless exhibited many good interactions and improvisations in his teaching, based on researcher observations. I was left wondering how these practices could be improved with consistent training in play pedagogy for the preschool classroom, greater access to materials and toys to engage the children, and opportunities to observe master teachers in early childhood.
CHAPTER FIVE

CASE STUDY TWO: MS. TUK

This chapter presents, analyzes, and interprets the study data from case two. The chapter begins with an introduction to the study site, setting, and the teacher. Next, chapter five gives and discusses the data generated from study site two using the following themes: (1) Cultural Learning, (2) Improvisation due to limited resources, and (3) Play benefits and supports. Reported findings and discussion in each section represents observational data, interview data, and artifacts collected during the study from site two. Observation data were used to construct two vignettes about the study teacher participant’s classroom; and selected highlights are given from my observation notes. The interview data collected from the teacher Ms. Pamela Tuk, are also used. The interview phase of data collection at site two followed the initial observation of classroom practice. This afforded me with the opportunity to adapt the interview questions based on the instruction observed during the previous week. Finally, the chapter concludes with a commentary on the study data.

Interviews followed observations during the last week of instruction. This afforded me the opportunity to adapt the interview questions based on the instruction and activities observed during the previous week. Ms. Tuk was gracious in accepting a request to meet and discuss her teaching, classroom practice, and students. Much of the information collected supported the inquiry of the study, with additional supporting information volunteered by Ms. Tuk during informal interviews or discussions. Ms. Tuk provided detailed responses to the interview questions and supplemented the answers with unique perspectives that made for a rich and informative data set. I conducted the interview during the afternoon session on June 28th. The interview with Ms. Tuk lasted over
an hour and a half in which she provided many stories, details, and examples of the many concepts we explored related to preschool teaching in Belize and play. Ms. Tuk was very experienced and added many nuances to the original interview questions. As noted in chapter two, I transcribed the interview and coded the data into 40 open codes, which were condensed into 18 themes (See Appendix E for a chart on the open codes for site two).

CASE TWO SETTING

The Toucan Preschool is a stand-alone preschool site that runs in connection to the University of Belize main campus located in the capital city of Belmopan. The city of Belmopan, located in the mountainous district of Cayo, site far into the mainland of Belize. Located about 40 miles from Belize City off the Western Highway, Belmopan is home to many of the main government buildings. The Toucan Preschool is located on a site adjacent to the University of Belize and serves the local community in addition to faculty and staff at the University. The campus consisted of two buildings housing the classrooms, restrooms, main office, multipurpose room, and kitchen.

The surrounding area of the school is typical of an urban city, albeit a small one. Belmopan is the second largest city in Belize behind Belize City. The city is largely accessible on foot though most of the locals own cars and use them to get about the city. In the city center, there is a large market where vendors sell local fare, clothing, and other supplies. The bus terminal connecting Belmopan to all other cities in Belize is in the city center as well as banks, restaurants, shops, and the government buildings. The local citizens work in many sectors such government employees, cashiers and clerks, bank tellers, waiters, and university faculty or staff, among many others. As such, the parents of the preschool children served at the Toucan Preschool are representative of a variety of backgrounds and professions.
The preschool grounds from Case Two, Toucan Preschool, are shown in Figure 5.1 from within the gated enclosure. The courtyard contains a fenced playground and a covered pavilion. Many of the trees and foliage of Belize grow in the yard of the preschool. The entire complex is closed off on a gated lot monitored by a security guard. Two other buildings owned and operated by the University are located in the same lot although the offices are not related to the preschool. There is a large open space for the children to run, covered in grass for a soft place to land. The playground structure is enclosed with a wooden gate and covered in sand. Children can climb, swing, and slide on the playground structure. A large tree hangs over the playground and provides shade. There are several painted tires embedded in the ground that encourage gross motor play. Children enjoy climbing and leaping from one tire to the next. There is a basketball hoop shown, but the children rarely used it. The covered pavilion, not pictured, provided a space for outdoor whole group activities such as morning meeting. The children engaged in group play outdoors under the pavilion during unstructured play time.

I arranged the visit to study site two by contacting the school principal by email. The principal and lead teacher were both willing to accommodate my request to observe at the Toucan Preschool. I arrived at the Toucan Preschool site was admitted by the security guard who
introduced me to the lead preschool teacher, Ms. Tuk. I was also introduced to the preschool aide, Ms. Shirley, who teaches the level one preschool for threes and fours.

Ms. Tuk showed me around the school grounds that contained two classrooms, one for level one and the other or level two preschoolers as well as the rest of the grounds (See figure 5.1). After greeting the principal, Ms. Tuk invited me into the Level II classroom where she about to begin the day’s lessons. There were a large group of children already seated at the various round tables in the room. After being dropped off, the children put their backpacks away on their hooks and find activities in the centers located throughout the room. As. Ms. Tuk explained, the beginning activities in the morning are mainly free-play time for the children.

**The Teacher and Students**

Ms. Tuk was very soft-spoken and kind with the children with an easy-going nature. She was able to maintain order and control of the classroom without needing to be too firm or assertive. The children were clearly accustomed to the routine of the classroom and the teacher's expectations. In many ways, the easy flow of the lesson and the day’s activities showed that the children were well oriented to school by this point in the year and showed great maturity and readiness for moving up to primary school. After the morning session, the children enjoyed snacks and then engaged in free play until their parents or caregivers picked them up. Ms. Tuk was easily accessible to parents if they needed to converse with her about anything. The parents and teachers were excited about the upcoming graduation ceremony and eager to find out how they could prepare and participate.

Ms. Tuk was a trained and certified in elementary education at the local university. She mentioned preparing lessons that included educational play for the early childhood range as part of her training. Ms. Tuk made use of the constructivist teaching philosophy by arranging her
room to provide opportunities for children to engage in educational play. The learning centers were designed so that the children can walk up to a center and play a game, read age appropriate books, watch videos, or engage in dramatic play that enhances their understanding of preschool learning goals.

There was a total of 32 students enrolled in the Toucan Preschool. Ms. Tuk’s classroom was the Level II preschool, with 18 five-year olds, and 5 four-year olds. The classroom was made up of 78% of Mestizo origin, 19% Creole, 2% Asian, and 1% Mayan (See Appendix I for a list of demographics in Ms. Tuk’s classroom). Instruction was delivered in English. Most students attended the morning session and were dismissed at midday. A small group of students stayed for the entire day in the morning and afternoon sessions, with lunch provided at the preschool (Field Notes, 6/22/15).

**The Classroom Physical Environment**

Figure 5.2 shows the entrance to Ms. Tuk’s preschool classroom. The children have designated hooks to hang their belongings marked with a school bus depicting their names. Visual aids, such as the handheld signs displaying actions, were hung on the wall next to the whiteboard. The parent communication folder is above the children's hooks. Ms. Tuk used this board to write messages to parents and families and hang notices and flyers of upcoming events. For example, an announcement informed parents of the upcoming graduation date and information regarding the event there. Ms. Tuk also included information on an upcoming workshop on social-emotional development in young children that would be held at the University that week.
Ms. Tuk’s desk was along the same wall as the front door. The children’s tables are arranged in the middle of the room within view of the chalkboard up front. Ms. Tuk stood at the front of the room and addressed the students during whole group instruction. The calendar was at one end of the chalkboard, and there was no morning circle rug in the room. Ms. Tuk explained that morning circle usually took place outdoors in the courtyard, weather permitting (Informal interview, 6/22/15). The remainder of the room was divided into academic learning centers along the periphery and also used for supply storage. Academic learning centers included dramatic play corners with replica toys and dolls, adult clothes, blankets and baby dolls, trucks, cars and building blocks. There were learning games available such as literacy and number bingo, puzzles, and card games. Additionally, a listening center was set up in the far corner with headphones, two television sets, a DVD player, and educational videos for children to watch.

The Classroom Social Environment

Ms. Tuk completed her degree and certification for early childhood from the local university. Her background afforded her a knowledge of educational theory (Informal interview 6/22/15). Even so, Ms. Tuk’s teaching practices included a mix of teacher-led and child-led activities with little intentional practices in between (See Table 5.1 for Ms. Tuk’s observed
Children were free to construct their own knowledge through engaging toys and games in the learning centers but did not receive any input or direction from Ms. Tuk during these periods. Instructional practices were mainly didactic, with call and response teaching, worksheets, and one-on-one conversations. The class time permeated between whole group and individual activities. Small group instruction was not observed (Field Notes, 6/24/15).

Table 5.1 Observations of Ms. Tuk’s Instructional Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Researcher notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Gentleness</td>
<td>Ms. Tuk has a gentle, calm demeanor that she approaches the children. She is very patient and listens to the children when they want to share something with her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Teaching</td>
<td>Ms. Tuk’s teaching is direct, using the Socratic method to coach the children toward the right answers. Multiple methods of instruction – workbooks, educational videos, direct instruction, whole group, small group, one-on-one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Innovation</td>
<td>She is creative and resourceful. Though she laments not having enough materials to do activities she uses what is available to make interesting crafts: - egg carton caterpillar, - colored sand jars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Planning</td>
<td>Ms. Tuk is organized and plans lessons using the curriculum book for Level II and the yearly planner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Tutoring</td>
<td>Ms. Tuk spends time with children that need individualized support. She asks that those children attend morning and afternoon sessions, where she can provide the child with tutoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The curriculum utilized was the same national preschool curriculum used in all other preschool in Belize, provided by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum allowed Ms. Tuk to teach the children all required skills expected for the preschool year. It did not assist with the social aspects of the classroom that were a challenge for Ms. Tuk, such as classroom management of a large group and instruction for special needs learners. There was at least one student that Ms. Tuk explained as a behavioral and educational challenge. She explained that she felt ill-equipped to handle this student and did not feel well supported in doing so (Formal interview, 6/28/15). These
types of constraints serve as an indicator of improvements that can be made to support the knowledge, skills, and effectiveness of Belizean early childhood teachers such as Ms. Tuk.

Once most of the children arrived and settled in before the morning activities begin, Ms. Tuk asked the children to put away the toys they were playing with and line up at the door. Ms. Tuk led the children outside to the pavilion where they met the level one classroom, led by Ms. Shirley. Circle time activities commenced which included singing the Belizean national anthem and saying the pledge, saying a prayer to bless the day, songs and a dramatic play game led by the teachers in a whole group setting. Ms. Tuk afforded the children some time to spend outdoors during these circle time activities happening in the open-fresh air pavilion.

Following circle time, the children were asked to line up to head indoors for the lesson oriented activities. Ms. Tuk led the children through whole group activities then the children were separated into small groups. As it was the end of the school year, Ms. Tuk led them through a review of what they had learned included letters, numbers, letter sounds, shapes and other skills. The children each had individual workbooks that Ms. Tuk used to supplement lessons in smaller groups. In our interview, she mentioned using the workbooks in particular for children who needed help learning the academic content necessary for school readiness. The literacy center was also media friendly. There was a television with a DVD player that children sit in front of to watch educational videos that teach preschool concepts like letters and numbers with corresponding images and sounds. Ms. Tuk shared that at times the children would prefer being indoors and watching the videos instead of being outside, particularly if it is too hot or a rainy day outdoors. Following lessons, the children had more opportunities for free play out on the playground or indoors in the learning center.
Cultural Learning in Ms. Tuk’s Classroom

During the interview with Ms. Tuk, she mentioned moments when the curriculum or activities with the students are modified to be more specific or relevant to the culture of Belize. In other instances, she mentioned aspects of her daily schedule that include activities that are culturally relevant to Belizean schooling. Her students were led through prayers, they learn to sing national anthem, and the pledge and they learn about the national symbols and specific aspects of their local culture such as the ethnic backgrounds and food.

The following vignette describes a lesson I observed in Ms. Tuk’s classroom, which illustrates how she imparts cultural knowledge to the children on how to be a “good citizen.”

Vignette 2.1 “Good Citizen.”

Ms. Tuk quietly calls for her classroom of sixteen students to line up at the door. It is humid and slightly overcast out, but she is leading them over to the covered pavilion for circle time. Her purpose is dual, she wants to get them up and active for the morning meeting, and she wants to have them practice their graduation songs and poems in an open space, similar to the auditorium where the event will take place.

Ms. Shirley’s younger preschool class has come out to join them. They will not graduate this year but will practice a farewell tribute to the graduating class. They walk in a quiet, single file line from their classroom to the pavilion. The children stand around to join in while Ms. Tuk leads them through a morning prayer.

Ms. Tuk has chosen three children to recite poems for the graduation ceremony. The children take turns reciting their poem, to the best of their knowledge. Ms. Tuk asks Jeremy, a Kriol boy, to repeat his poem as he has omitted several lines. Finally, Ms. Tuk announces that the children should then practice reciting the national anthem. She carries a portable cd player and hits the “play,” button. The opening bars of the national anthem of Belize begin to play the song. The children begin the song at different times, fumble with the words and proceed to stop and start over at several intervals. Several boys shout the words they do know over the disharmonious thunder of voices. Ms. Tuk does not stop them and lets the song play to its conclusion.

She finally stops the CD player and addresses the group. “Okay, class. That was a good first try. Now, listen carefully. When we all sing together, it is important that we can hear one another and ourselves. You mustn't shout when you sing the national anthem. It is a very important song. When you shout, we can't hear what you are saying. So say it clearly. You should make it sound beautiful, so your mommies and daddies will be proud. And you should feel proud, too!”

Ms. Tuk speaks in a lengthy, quiet voice. The children know to pay close attention so that they can hear her. “When you sing the national anthem of Belize you must stand straight and proud. Let me see you stand up straight.”
Ms. Tuk surveys the crowd, who has all stood up straight and tall. She asks Jeremy to “place his hands to his side.”

“Okay, very good. Now we will try it again. And make sure that you are listening to the music and we are all singing together. All right?”

The children appear ready to impress Ms. Tuk the second time around. With hands by their sides, standing straight and tall, they are off to a better start, beginning the song in unison, “Oh land of the free by the Carib Sea…”

Ms. Tuk and Ms. Shirley sing along with them, careful to not overpower the young voices, but carrying the tune and lyrics when the children inevitably stumble on words such as “democracy,” “despots,” and “oppression.” It is evident that the children have practiced the national anthem many times, but the song was written carefully with many allusions to the history of nation’s land and people. Thus, it is not a simple song to memorize and recite. What’s more, there are several verses to the song, although citizens only sing the first two verses at public gatherings.

“Okay, much better. Now you are ready. Now you sound like you are ready to sing the national anthem proudly for your mommies and daddies at graduation.”

**Enculturation**

In vignette 2.1, Ms. Tuk’s graduating preschool class practices the program that they will participate in for graduation. Ms. Tuk has been preparing them for graduation by teaching them songs, poems and having them practice the national anthem of Belize. I recorded whole group activities during observations of Ms. Tuk’s classroom at Toucan Preschool. Whole group circle time regularly took place outdoors under the pavilion when weather permitted. Whole group circle time also included the younger, Level I students in the adjacent classroom. Both teachers assisted students in practicing songs, poems, and rhymes to recite during the upcoming graduation ceremony for the graduating Level II students.

The graduating children were placed in pairs and asked to recite short poems that would welcome parents, family and other supporters of the graduates at the ceremony. Each day the children would be asked to recite their parts during the morning meeting time. Also, the children practiced the national anthem, pledge to Belize, and school song. They would also sing songs and fingerplays for a circle time activity that lasted about thirty minutes. During the whole group
activities, there was a consistent focus on nationalistic pride, religious songs and prayer, and movement or physical play, such as running or jumping.

I observed that the children knew how to produce the national anthem of Belize in what was considered the “correct way.” They were instructed to stand straight, with hands to their side during the recital on the national anthem as well as their pledge to Belize. It was interesting to see the emphasis placed on how these national symbols should sound from children so young. The children seemed well trained in both saying the words to the song and in belting the anthem, undoubtedly due to their familiarity with saying it daily during morning circle. It is remarkable that most of the children could perform these tasks given that the national anthem of Belize contains several words that are difficult for young children to pronounce -- such as, “tyrants,” “despots,” “democracy,” and “oppression.”

During the first recording of the children singing the Belizean national anthem, it was evident that some children, typically the older ones, were better versed in the words of the song and carried the tune for the younger ones. At one point, some children started the song over when they forgot the next lines of the song. They were able to get back on track once the others continued correctly, assisting them to find their place in the song. Nevertheless, after the first recitation, Ms. Tuk admonished the children in how they delivered the anthem the first time around. At first Ms. Tuk was critical, but her tone became gentle while correcting the mistakes they made, but she wanted to emphasize that the song should be revered and respected, an important aspect in the development of their cultural awareness. The style of Ms. Tuk’s corrections in this vignette represents a cultural element to her teaching within the Belizean culture.

This recalls Rogoff (2003) who explained an example of cultural teaching practices in Haiti. A teacher by the name of Clothilde displayed a seemingly harsh style of reprimanding
students when correcting the children’s behaviors. There was a deliberate back and forth style of questioning that involved the teacher helping the children arrive at the right answer to correct a misdeed. Although I did not observe this behavior from Ms. Tuk, there were certainly echoes of the similarities to Belize and Ms. Tuk in cultural practices among the Haitian teachers Rogoff described. Ms. Tuk manner was always very kind and gentle with the children yet when she was correcting their delivery of the national anthem, she was very firm in her directions. As Rogoff noted, there was a kind of caring in the interactions the teachers had that translated to the children. They felt a motherly form of caring from the teacher towards them when they were corrected while crossing the street, for example. In a similar sense, Ms. Tuk’s tone could be perceived as motherly within the strict childrearing culture of Belize.

In the 5.2 vignette, Ms. Tuk began by instructing the children in how to stand straight for the start of the song as shown in Table 5.2. The children, familiar with this instruction, then instructed one another to stand with “hands to your side.” After hearing the discord of the first recitation, Ms. Tuk explained to the children that when they shouted the song, it became unintelligible, they can hurt their throats, and it simply does not, “sound beautiful.” This was an interesting observation. The national anthem, to Ms. Tuk, should be sung with pride, seriousness, and it is meant to sound beautiful to one’s ears.

These messages convey to the children a sense of pride in one of the most important symbols of Belize. The messages also imparted information on cultural norms that the children will be expected to follow. This is an important part of enculturation. The children will be expected to fulfill their roles as “good citizens” by singing the national anthem the way Ms. Tuk had instructed them.
Similarly, the pledge to Belize was memorized and recited by the children in the same fashion, with hands to their side, standing straight. The symbolism of the pledge the children recite mirrors the same message of duty and service to their families, communities, and to Belize as the nation’s “hope.” Children are taught to honor and respect their families, teachers, themselves, and one another as early as preschool age by reciting their national anthem and pledge. These symbols teach them societal expectations as the nation's youngest citizens, and teachers emphasize the symbols through their instruction. The instructions given highlight the developmentally and culturally appropriate practices at play in this Belizean preschool. The cultural knowledge of learning how to say the national anthem and pledge to Belize will follow these preschool students throughout their education.

Table 5.2 Preschool Graduation Prep: “We love our Toucan Preschool.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. Tuk</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Contextual Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And now, let’s put our feet together. And sing our national anthem! Ready?</td>
<td>Hands to your side! Hands to your side!</td>
<td>The teacher imparts that they should respect and honor the national anthem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When we shout the National Anthem, it doesn’t sound beautiful. Let me see you stand straight first. Let me just make sure that everybody is standing straight. Right, Charles? Ready, Anna? Rosa? Hands to your side, Henry.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Tuk provided direct instruction on how the national anthem should sound. It should “sound beautiful,” she instructed. As an important national symbol of pride, citizens should sing the anthem with clarity, in unison. Children are provided with feedback and asked to sing it again. More emphasis provided on “standing up straight.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My pledge to Belize: Belize is my country, I am the hope of Belize. Belize is my family, my school, my church, and my community. I am the hope of Belize. The hope of my parents and my teacher, the hope of today and tomorrow. I live and learn not only for myself but for my sisters and brothers. I am the hope of Belize. I promise to serve Belize as faithfully as I can.</td>
<td>Children recite the pledge to Belize. Preschool children must memorize and recite this daily. Children are taught their role in their homes, communities, schools and society through this pledge. Imparts the messages of pride in oneself and the betterment of oneself toward the greater good of society.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>We love our Toucan preschool, our preschool, our preschool, we love our Toucan preschool, Where we learn and we grow. Our teachers all love us, we help one another, we love our Toucan preschool, the best of them all.</td>
<td>Children learn the school song which represents the vision of the preschool. They are taught to care for one another and be friends, that teachers are caring and responsive, and that school is a place to learn and grow.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

The preschool graduation rehearsal described above had two important purposes. First, the teacher is preparing the children for a significant event in the early years of their education. Belizeans celebrate graduations as tremendous milestones. Preschool is the latest addition to education in Belize, and the families and teachers make a concerted effort to celebrate the successful completion of preschool. The preschool arranges graduation ceremonies with caps and gowns. Families dress their children in formal wear and throw large parties with friends and extended family. As a result, Ms. Tuk prepared the children for the big event by having them practice the ceremony she had arranged. Additionally, this type of preparation was an opportunity for social learning. Children learned that a major event is something to prepare for through practice and repetition so that they can perform well on the day of the event.

The second purpose of this activity was to impart cultural knowledge to the children. Ms. Tuk reviewed the children’s ability to sing the national anthem in great detail. She explained that they should sing the song with pride, standing straight and tall. These messages instilled in young
children leave an impression. As a preschool teacher, Ms. Tuk has the important task of shaping the youngest citizens. It is her desire that they learn the importance of a major symbol of national pride such as the national anthem. Through her coaching, the children can begin to learn how to behave like good citizens. These messages indicate the guided participation and participatory appropriate elements of Rogoff’s three planes theory. As the children participate in the preschool graduation ceremony practice, Ms. Tuk shares the importance of the national anthem as a symbol of Belizean culture. She gives explicit instruction in how it should be sung which provides the children with lessons on how to participate in cultural activities. Furthermore, as they participate they begin to appropriate this knowledge through doing and interacting. The cultural knowledge shared encompass the three planes of community, interpersonal and personal according to Rogoff’s theory.

Ms. Tuk may not realize this, but her instructions on how to properly sing the national anthem and say the pledge to Belize can become a part of the children’s internal speech. According to Vygotsky (1978), children internalize messages from their immediate environments that form scripts for how to solve problems and approach new situations:

A child’s speech is as important as the role of action in attaining the goal. Children not only speak about what they are doing; their speech and action are part of one and the same complex psychological function, directed toward the solution of the problem at hand. (p. 25)

Based on observations, the children in Ms. Tuk’s graduating preschool class were given explicit instructions about how the national anthem should sound. As a result, they internalize the notions of “pride,” “beautiful singing,” and “standing tall,” and associate them with the national anthem. Vygotsky speaks about the idea of internal speech associated with children’s play, explaining that while playing children can be observed speaking or whispering to themselves words heard from adults and caregivers: “The child begins to perceive the world not only through
his [or her] eyes but also through his [or her] speech” (1978, p. 32). This speech helps to regulate their behaviors and emotions. The same concept can be said to be at play in Ms. Tuk’s graduation role-play. She walked the children through an important experience like their upcoming graduation ceremony, instilled the importance of singing the national anthem beautifully and allowed them to practice until they did it right. Later, the children can mentally recall Ms. Tuk’s instructions in separate contexts that will help them remember the importance of these symbols of nationalistic pride.

**Cultural Tools: Religious Songs and Prayer**

Religion is an integral part of formal schooling throughout the country. Most schools in Belize have a religious affiliation with varying levels of government support. This is a common practice due to the nation’s history of church-run schools. I readily noted that religion is also a part of the preschool education. The culture of religion and schooling is so prominent that the Toucan Preschool adopted prayer as a feature of circle time without the school having a religious affiliation. Ms. Tuk shared that although there are many cultural backgrounds such as Mestizo, Creole, and Mayan represented in her preschool, she leads the children through morning prayers for the school day, their family, friends, and other prayers of petition, thanksgiving, and adoration. She also said that the purpose of prayer to the children was to ask God to bless their families, friends, and teachers, and those less fortunate.

Whole group time regularly included Christian prayers and religious songs. As previously mentioned, Ms. Tuk explained that the preschool had no religious affiliation, but prayer was still a featured part of the start to her school day (Formal interview, 6/28/15). Many schools in Belize today are still religiously affiliated, as in case one. These schools incorporate prayer, devotion, or even church attendance into the school day. As a stand-alone site, the presence of prayer and
religion might seem unusual, but it is more likely the norm of Belizean society that influences the role of religiosity in schooling even at the preschool level. Here follows an example:

Ms. Tuk: All right, now let’s put our beautiful hands together...close our beautiful eyes, too.
Ms. Tuk & Children (call and response):
Help us, Lord,
As we enjoy,
This beautiful day.
Guide us,
And protect us,
Take care of our family,
Our friends,
And ones that are sick.
Bless our family,
Our teachers,
Our friends,
And all the ones,
Who have no mommy,
No daddy, no home,
And no food.
We ask all this
In Jesus’ name, Amen.
(Field notes, 6/25/15)

During the prayer time, the children are also instructed how to pray, with hands together and eyes closed. Ms. Tuk leads the children through the prayer and is sure to remind them for whom to pray—that is, as previously noted, for those familiar to the children such as family, teachers, and friends, and, sometimes for those that are sick or for those who do not have families or provisions. This act teaches children to appreciate those they love and about benevolence.

Protestant religious songs were also a central part of morning circle sessions. In one example, Ms. Tuk sings a familiar children’s song, “If you’re happy and you know it,” but changes the lyrics to make it religious:

Ms. Tuk and Children: If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands, if you’re happy
and you know it clap your hands, if you’re happy and you know, and you really
want to show it, if you’re happy and you know it clap your hands. If you’re happy
and you know it stomp your feet, if you’re happy and you know it stomp your feet,
if you’re happy and you know and you really want to show it, if you’re happy and you know it stomp your feet. If you’re happy and you know it shout “Amen!”

(Children say, “Amen!”)

Ms. Tuk: Oh, I did not heard you! If you’re happy and you know it shout “Amen!” (Children shout, “Amen!”)
Ms. Tuk: Ahhh! If you’re happy and you know and you really want to show it, if you’re happy and you know it shout “Amen!”

(Children shout, “Amen!”)
(Children shout, “Amen!”)

(Field notes, 6/19/15)

In another example, Ms. Tuk leads the children through a religious song that also incorporates learning that takes place in preschool:

Ms. Tuk & Children: My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do. He can make a circle like this, He can make a square like this, He can make a triangle too! There’s nothing my God cannot do. He can make the stars that shine, He can make a heart like mine. He can make a diamond too! There’s nothing my God cannot do. My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do. For you, and you, and you, you, you!

(Field notes, 6/24/15)

This song integrates religious themes as well as language and literacy skills that are familiar to the preschool children. The song lyrics express the omnipotence of God, “there’s nothing my God cannot do.” The children also recite shapes such as circle, square, triangle, star, heart, and diamond in this song, serving the dual purpose of praising God and reciting their shapes. In converging the concepts of religion and academic learning, the song reinforces the central idea of both in a way that is accessible to the children.

The adoption of a daily prayer and the incorporation of religious songs serve as reinforcement for instilling cultural tools in the children. Within Belizean society, there is a strong emphasis on religion of the Christian faith. These are mainly delivered as Protestant values and beliefs. Even though Toucan preschool is not religiously affiliated it follows the model of many
other preschool and primary schools that are. Statistical data on the number of religiously affiliated schools in Belize is limited, but approximately 60% of primary schools in Belize were still religiously affiliated as of the 1990s (UNESCO, 2003). In these schools, prayer, and religious games and songs form an educative-religious fabric with Christian values woven in the daily school routine. Ms. Tuk’s preschool encourages young children to engage in this practice, providing them with knowledge and practice for including prayer and religious songs in their routine.

These cultural tools allow them to gain confidence in their ability to participate in religious customs. The songs help children build their vocabularies and oral and receptive language. There are many opportunities to practice at language, literacy, and phonological awareness during these interactions. Ms. Tuk uses the religious songs and finger plays to encourage active participation and to allow children to practice these language conventions. Children were not seen to engage big concepts of religion during these sessions. They were content to repeat the words, participate with their bodies, and follow along as part of the group. I did not witness children engage the teacher in questions or conversations related to religious themes connected to the songs, nor did I witness children repeating or reenacting religious references during free play.

Ms. Tuk Improvises Due to Limited Resources

Differentiated Instruction and Other Challenges

At times Ms. Tuk found that she needed to modify the content of her lessons to accommodate differing levels of knowledge in her students. She shares her recognition of the different abilities and skill sets of her students throughout the year based on her own observations and using the assessment booklets as regular progress monitoring. She explains that once children meet the learning goals indicated in the assessments, then she feels it necessary to move on to other
topics. Conversely, if there are students that continue to struggle with content, she will mark them as “developing” in those skills and subsequently she will provide those children with added practice in the areas that need improvement.

As an additional benefit to some families, she reported in formal interview that she also suggests that the child enrolls in both the morning and afternoon session where she can provide the child with more tailored tutoring during the afternoon due to lower class sizes. Ms. Tuk finds that it is a benefit to the students enrolled in the afternoon to receive more individualized instruction, which also aids in her planning and preparation for the busier morning sessions. That way she can spend afternoons assisting developing children with core skills that will improve their understanding and participation in the morning sessions for a more integrative approach to differentiated instruction.

The following vignette, put together from different observations, describes a lesson in which Ms. Tuk engages the children in a review of the alphabet letters and sounds that they have covered during the school year.

**Vignette 2.2 “ABC, But Not Me.”**

The school year is drawing to a close. The children seem to feel a shift in the atmosphere as well. Their teacher is not as diligent in keeping to their busy morning schedule. It is review time, and they are asked to repeat the same lessons they have as yet mastered. Ms. Tuk is aware of the apathy but explains that they must fill the mornings with learning activities, yet they are not allowed to move on from the prescribed curricular content. Some children inevitably become bored. So, she will go over what they know, play a game to reinforce the skill, and then allow them some time for free play.

In this lull period just before graduation, she simply reviews previous content in hopes of catching the few students that remain behind the preschool learning goals. These are the children she identifies for one-on-one instruction while the rest of the group completes small group art projects or engages in learning activity centers.

“I try to give each child some individual attention,” she says, “but it is hard with so many students. Some know all the letters and sounds, others still need help learning a few. I ask the parents to send those one in the afternoon as well, so I can work with them more.”

Ms. Tuk stands at the front of the room and claps three times in quick succession to get the children’s attention. They are seated at six round tables arranged across the classroom and have all
packed up from eating a snack and are still wound up with the excitement of friendly conversation. I mentally calculate that they are using a level two voice, typically reserved for outdoors. Ms. Tuk is soft-spoken and struggles to carry her voice over the litany of twelve tiny conversations. Gradually the front of the room responds to Ms. Tuk’s call to order, and the remaining conversations come to a close.

“Ok, class, we are going to go over our letters,” Ms. Tuk’s more formal voice rings out over the group. She walks over to the letter chart hung on the wall. With a pointer, she selects five letters for the class to review.

“Who can tell me what letter is this?” she asks, indicating the letter, “P.” Three children raise their hands. “Yes, Keisha?”

“It is a ‘P,’ teacher, ‘P’ like pig,” Keisha announces proudly, her black braided plaits shining in the sun.

“Yes, very good, Keisha. What about the sound? What does ‘P’ sound like?” Keisha calls out, “Puh!” and several children around her follow, making the sound. This recall activity continues while the class reviews the final set of letters - P, X, Y, F, and Q.

I’ve begun to scan the room to notice any students that might be struggling with this activity, as Ms. Tuk mentioned. Most children are keeping up with the letter identification and corresponding sounds. Some are simply watching but remain attentive. Then there is William. William is an Asian boy with a buzz cut and deep-set, brown eyes. He has been fidgeting for the better part of the last five minutes and at this point is flicking his eraser off his pencil and scoots off his chair continuously to pick it up off the floor, repeatedly. Ms. Tuk has not noticed and keeps her focus on the class participants.

William pays her no attention. His eraser finally bounces far enough across the floor under the adjacent table and rolls until it finds itself under Ms. Tuk’s desk. He springs off after it, sliding his metal chair loudly across the linoleum floor. William is now crouched down under Ms. Tuk’s desk. He finds his eraser, perches comfortably under the desk and plays with it. He holds it up in the air, squeezing it between his fingers.

Ms. Tuk has concluded the call and response portion of her lesson and is passing out worksheets to continue reviewing the selected letters. She stumbles upon William, now lying down on the floor beneath her desk.

“William! You must come out from under there. Come now, William,” she commands. William won’t budge. He is comfortable there and does not plan to acquiesce. “He likes to sit under there sometimes,” Ms. Tuk explains, smiling sheepishly at me. “He will come out when he’s ready.”

Ms. Tuk’s lesson demonstrates the challenges presented when she must follow a prescribed curriculum that deters her from moving beyond the cognitive ability level or acquired knowledge of her students. As she described in her interview, the children were well familiar with the content she was expected to review by the end of the school year. Many of them were tired of going over the same lesson. Some children resorted to minor behavioral disruptions that may or may not have been caused by the excessive review lessons (Field notes, 6/26/15).
Ms. Tuk follows the prescribed “role,” that the Ministry of Education expects her to fulfill, though it is not helping her students. In her role as “teacher,” Ms. Tuk follows the prescribed curriculum that intentionally holds back the preschoolers from learning content that is taught in Infant I. Ostensibly, this is done to prevent the children from feeling “overwhelmed.” By the end of the school year, Ms. Tuk knows her students and can discern that they are bored with the same content in her lessons. It appears more important that she follow the assumed role expected of her than to deter from the curriculum provided. This example shows how the government policies, or what is an aspect of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), serve to influence Ms. Tuk’s preschool classroom. In this case, it can appear as a negative influence and constraint on the preschool educator’s teaching practice.

A sound knowledge of DAP classroom management or socially and environmentally constructed learning was also missing from Ms. Tuk’s lesson. A common practice observed each day was the delivery of instruction. The children were seated at circular tables but faced front throughout the lesson. There was little interaction encouraged between the children during this lesson and many others. Socialization was limited to free, unstructured play and teacher-led play activities. The formal lessons seemed to involve mainly didactic instruction. Ms. Tuk engaged in frontal, direct teaching, being at the front of the class, and the center of attention; she led the children through call and response and recall performance with assigned worksheets. There were opportunities to expand on the knowledge the children were displaying, but Ms. Tuk did not seize them. Following the whole group lessons, Ms. Tuk was observed assisting individual children after each lesson (Field notes, 6/24/15, 6/25/15). She mentioned that she had identified some students that needed additional tutoring, providing this service in afternoons and during free-play in centers
Formal interview, 6/28/15). This allowed Ms. Tuk to differentiate instruction, a key concept in DAP.

There were instances where Ms. Tuk’s assignments served the dual focus of teaching the children specific skills and teach them helpful information in self-awareness. One such activity that was mentioned featured art projects that Ms. Tuk had the students complete to practice fine motor development, letter recognition, and writing. She explained that while the children completed drawing of their families, they had to practice writing their names as well as family members’ names and label them accordingly. As they were completing this assignment, Ms. Tuk noticed that some children did not know the names of their parents, information that would prove important in the event of an emergency. She shares that she found it important to use this activity as a teachable moment to scaffold their understanding of family. Ms. Tuk covered the areas of learning in the classroom as well as key individual social and emotional development where the children are learning more about themselves and the members of their families. This aspect of her teaching highlights her focus on making important connections between the home and school (Field notes, 6/27/15).

Also, special education was an area that Ms. Tuk showed limited knowledge and capacity to accommodate. Ms. Tuk did not directly address whether she had special needs children in her classroom, but she mentioned that certain children were “behind” academically or displayed challenging behavior. Ms. Tuk did not mention specific strategies that she employed to differentiate instruction for children that required academic support. Instead, she explained that she asked parents to send the child to the afternoon sessions when she could tutor them individually. She made no mention of whether she believed the children had developmental delays or limited intellectual capacity. She also discussed a boy who regularly displayed challenging
behaviors. The child acted out regularly, and she found it difficult to manage the rest of the class when he did. As a means of addressing the issue, she told the child that she would call his grandmother if he continued to behave badly. She knew the child's grandmother lived a few doors down from the preschool. On one occasion, based on interview report, she asked the grandmother to come to the school to reprimand the child. Belize is currently undergoing reform in many areas of education. Special education is one area in which Belize needs extensive changes to serve special needs children and their families adequately. The Ministry of Education continues to strive to reach this goal, included in the recent educational reform plans for 2011-2016 and will likely be included in the next planning phases for educational reform (MOE, 2010).

Ms. Tuk mentioned that the Ministry provided Belize's preschools with a curriculum and that is where they will turn and decide the content to cover. The Ministry of Education provides the preschools with a curriculum book that is divided by levels into level one and level two by age and units and themes for each level. Three and four-year-old children will be taught using the level one curriculum while older fours and five-year olds will be taught from the level two curriculum. Ms. Tuk taught the Level II classroom and showed me her copy of the curriculum guide. One of the main differences between the two levels is that the alphabet is divided between the two and only some letters are taught in each level, so as “not to stress the children.”

Ms. Tuk then used the curriculum to plan the lessons. She combined active learning and play that was teacher-generated with worksheets and workbooks from the curriculum to teach children the content that they are expected to know based on the learning goals provided by the Ministry. Some activities that she planned for the children included learning games, songs, rhymes and movement activities that will teach them letters, numbers, shapes, colors and more. She explained that by using the curriculum, she creates a weekly “scale” or calendar that will map out
each lesson for the days of the school week (Formal interview, 6/28/15). Ms. Tuk regularly improvises when there is a need to teach a lesson or content that is missing the appropriate materials to provide hands-on learning. She shared examples of artwork and crafts that accompanied her previous lessons using reusable and inexpensive materials.

![Curriculum Book](image)

Figure 5.3 – Level II Curriculum Book

The curriculum book for preschool in Belize is shown in Figure 5.3 by topic. The curriculum has ten units with individual themes and topics. Teachers can follow the units and design learning activities around the theme. The topics shown provide a sub-context for teaching children specific information about the unit and theme.

Some units contain culturally specific learning goals to Belize. In Unit 5, children are taught using the theme, “Our World.” Children learn about the world outside of Belize. Then they begin learning specific details of their surrounding environment as a special topic, “Belize, Our Country.” Additionally, in Unit 10 the children learn about holidays, what makes them special and how Belizeans commemorate holidays. Specifically, the children learn which holidays Belizeans
celebrate. The curriculum book shows a list of the main holidays observed in Belize, including Independence Day, Baron Bliss Day, and Carib Settlement day.

From my observations and Ms. Tuk’s descriptions of daily activities, there is a strong focus on academic learning at the Toucan Preschool. Here, Ms. Tuk describes a typical lesson focusing on one letter:

“If it’s a, ahem, if it’s a letter that I would be working with, em, we will identify the letter “F,” the capital and lower case “F”. The sound of the letter “F”. What we can write with “F”. Like, “fish,” “frog,” “flower,” all of those. Um, we would sing songs, and how the “F” says, “fff”. “ (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

She emphasized that the children need to learn their letters and the sounds. She also provided many examples of how letter recognition is reinforced through play. She described songs, finger plays, poems, and rhymes that teach and reinforce their learning in language and literacy. Even in instances where play is the focus of the activity, such as a game of bingo, there is an academic content area integrated in some way. In this case, the bingo game teaches children to identify numbers. Ms. Tuk’s activities embody the use of play and movement to reinforce learning goals.

Even though she has an academic purpose to her activities it is clear that she tries to do so within the context of play-- a concept that encourages the “whole child” approach to teaching in early childhood. As children engage in these activities together she encourages an environment of scaffolding within Vygotsky’s theory of ZPD. While she is leading songs and rhymes, she can listen for missing information and fill the spaces for the children. Likewise, the children can observe their peers reciting poems and finger plays, and mimic the behaviors they see to encourage learning and mastery.

Ms. Tuk commented on skills or behaviors she considered necessary to school readiness in her preschool students. Ms. Tuk mentioned that socialization, fine motor skills and setting the foundation for learning are essential to school readiness.
“Well, I believe that the first one would be like, the socialization. Because some of them when they don't come to preschool and they reach into Infant I, that is where they throw their tantrums and they begin to cry and they don't want to stay because it's the first experience to them rather if they had come to preschool to socialize at preschool. So now, yes, they're scared because it's a different teacher, different environment, and maybe different new friends, but they're already acquainted with it. Um, the other one I would say would be different skills like, manipulatives things that they could be able to hold a pencil correctly, um, crayons, um, because some of them they would do it like this, and if you don't correct them they continue like that. Or even the crayons they will hold it like that. And, and then um, for them to hold it properly and teach them the, the, the proper way to write the letter or the number. You know, the, the correct way, how it goes.” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

Here Ms. Tuk explained mastery goals most important to preparing the children for the start of formal school the following year. She mentioned that children who come to preschool have an advantage over children that do not in the areas of socialization and building foundational knowledge such as fine motor skills. Children who did not attend preschool would spend the beginning of Infant I learning to separate from parents, how to be a part of a whole group, how to make friends, and learning how a teacher and a classroom function.

They already enter school with those experiences and can focus on adjusting to a new teacher, classroom and meeting new friends. They also practice important skills like cutting, tracing, writing their names and letters and as she mentioned, holding crayons and pencils correctly. These preschool days provide the children with a wealth of experiences that prepare them well for beginning formal education when their abilities and performance begin to count for the educational record.

In addition, Ms. Tuk used her assessment booklet to track student’s growth and progress throughout the year. Ms. Tuk used the assessment booklet to document the students as they played indoors in centers and outdoors on the playground (Field notes, 6/25/15). She explained that she found playtime to be an appropriate context to accurately view what students could do, the knowledge they were acquiring, and their progress toward mastery of preschool concepts (Formal
The observations and records that the Ms. Tuk were collected on each child. The booklet is a leveled, developmental skills checklist that allows the teacher to fill in whether the child has achieved or is developing the set of learning and developmental goals set for the year of preschool. There is one for level one and level two years of preschool for the three, four and five-year-old children. Ms. Tuk shared that these booklets are essential to parent conferences in providing parents with important feedback on their child’s progress toward learning goals. She shared the information with the families and provides them with a photocopy of the current report. The information is used to plan new learning outcomes for the child and to provide families with activities that they can do at home to encourage further learning for the children. This method is consistent with Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development (1978). Teachers must work within the space just beyond a child’s abilities to spur further cognitive development. When teachers like Ms. Tuk take the time to assess each child’s abilities and use that information to plan further instruction, they are functioning within the framework developmentally appropriate practice. The macrosystem provision of the assessment booklets shows a positive affordance for preschool teachers to fulfill these developmental needs.

Reusable Materials

The educational resources available to ECE teachers in Belize are indeed limited. Those available at local general merchandise stores come with the added burden of staggering costs. During the time of the study, I visited the general stores where teachers and parents can obtain school supplies. While many stores provided, at moderately reasonable prices, basic supplies such as pencils, paper, notebooks, crayons, and paint, other items such as packaged toys and preschool learning materials that were priced at a considering markup and were hence unreasonable for teachers to obtain on a limited budget. Ms. Tuk shared her concern over limited teaching supplies,
mainly toys, for her classroom, and later reiterated her expressed wish that she could procure for her class some of the nicer materials that were available in the United States.

As a general cultural practice, many Belizeans make a yearly trip to Mexico to obtain merchandise that are either not available at home or available at better prices than in Belize; and teachers can and do certainly also make this annual shopping trek. At a rate of once-yearly, any toys or materials obtained for classrooms can also not be easily replaced. Still, there were ways that Ms. Tuk made do with the limited resources in her classroom. She explained that she will seek out ways of using materials already in the classroom to make supplies for lessons or art projects, an idea picked up from a teacher training session:

“Sometimes we have workshops as to different things that we use at home that sometimes we throw them away and we can use them to take them to school to, to build this and do that or use it for this and there. And sometimes I get surprised, all the while I have been throwing this in the garbage and I can use it! So, like, like that. Like, this year I did a caterpillar out of the egg trays. You know, it goes like that. So, I cut them, and then I turn it over and I give it to do the eyes, and then I did like little antennas with the leftover foam like that. And they stick it. And then I ha-I give them paint to paint it green. And then the next teacher said, ‘You know I didn’t have no clue to do a caterpillar like this.’ And, like, the same I would do before, and I say, ‘You know, this is a great idea.’” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

Utilizing reusable materials or those that would otherwise be thrown away is cheaper than relying solely on store-bought items. In developing country with limited resources, this practice is valuable in both maintaining beneficial standards in early childhood education by providing meaningful, hands-on activities for the children and also practical in utilizing every resource effectively to its greatest potential.

**Play Benefits and Supports in Ms. Tuk’s Preschool**

Ms. Tuk embraced the importance of play in the preschool classroom. She explained that in centers she provided store bought and handmade games, toys, and materials for the children to engage with together or individually that will be fun and teach them concepts. She believed that
children learn while they play and should be provided with resources and opportunities to engage in educational play. She also believed that play could form the basis of learning lifelong:

“Even with primary school children, only, like, sometimes, em, even when you, you are at the university level, sometime, you, you do things to study, you make it into a song. And you’re singing that song! If you want to- Yes, so you could remember it! So, and that’s a song. Or, or, or you do a little- Rhyme to it so that you can, “Oh, this, or that.” So, I think it, it works for anybody, any level. Only because, em, we are most focused on the, on the, on the children getting the academics. Right here focused on the, ‘Ok, that’s the letter ‘A!’ and only if we do it into different games.” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

She described the use of mnemonics even at the university level for students to remember important information in either a rhyme or a song. In that way, through play, learners of all ages are encouraged to find fun ways of retaining information.

When describing a day in the preschool, Ms. Tuk mentioned that she encourages the children to engage in free play in the “corners” or centers of the classroom at the beginning and the end of the school day. The opportunities provided in the schedule during the day show that free play is an important component of learning in the early childhood years. The Ministry of Education provides the daily schedule used in the preschools and contains scheduled time throughout the school day for children to engage in play both indoors and outdoors. Children can only experience the benefits of play if they receive the time, resources, and opportunities to engage in play that is unstructured, child-initiated, and sustained for sufficient periods of time.

![Figure 5.4 – Case Two Preschool Schedule](image)
Figure 5.4 shows the daily schedule for preschool in case two. Ms. Tuk displays the daily schedule at the children’s height. The daily preschool schedule mirrors the schedule followed in case one. It is unchanged as guided by the Ministry of Education. The format follows a pattern of free, unstructured playtime, lessons, and activities, followed by free, unstructured playtime.

**Parents Expectations**

Some barriers to play Ms. Tuk points to as a challenge in her preschool is parents’ expectations. She describes instances where parents feel they observed a too much play and wondered when instruction takes place:

“Sometimes they would come, and I say- like at the beginning of the year we have play dough because parents bring play dough in their list so I would give them play dough. And then, um, I will ask them to ‘Ok, I want you to form for me the number one.’ So when the parent leave them, they would see playing the kids play. So now, um, maybe we are finished and maybe the sun is too hot, or, you know I don’t want to take them outside, or we go and then we come back in because the sun is too hot sometimes, here it gets so hot. So we come, and then I would ask them, ‘Do you guys want to play with play dough?’ And they will say, ‘Yes!’ So now, when the parent come back they’re playing with play dough. Again. So sometimes you would have some parents say that ‘That teacher, she, she just, um, plays with the play dough.’ Or sometimes, um, when they ask the child, ‘What did you do today?’ ‘Nothing.’ You know, sometime you have student that say, “nothing.” So like, the parent would say, “Nothing? You did nothing?” So. ‘And I left you, you were playing play dough. I went to pick you up you were playing with play dough. And you did nothing? So that means maybe you spent the whole morning doing play dough?’ So like, or sometimes when they would come maybe we would be playing, “Hide and Seek.” So I would have a child turn his face to the wall and count and then the others would run and hide, you know. And that makes noise and, and then, um, em, if they would go under the table there and then they maybe I would go and find them. And then I would say, ‘I found you!’ And when I go under the table like that they will scream! You know? And then, when the parents would say like, ‘What are you doing? I’m not paying for my child to just come and play.’ But they’re not seeing what is behind it…so. Yes, a lot of times we, we get that. Well they, sometimes they don’t come to me they go to the principal and tell her. And, and then she would come and tell me.” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

As Ms. Tuk explained, the parents come to the school with a set of expectations of what the child will be doing during the school day. Often, they are met with surprise when they observe the child doing the same activity as when they were dropped off. With tuition costs, some parents
wonder when learning takes place and where the money they spend is going. Ms. Tuk explained that in order to offset these concerns she does invite families to an orientation session where she shares the classroom activities, the philosophy of learning through play and other important information of what to expect. Still, she will get a parent that does not feel satisfied that the program is rigorous enough academically. These parents feel that it is important to push the child to learn instead of playing. Ms. Tuk may feel it necessary to explain to these parents the value of educational play where they are engaging in fun activities while also meeting specific goals in academic learning.

**Teacher Training**

When asked specifically about teacher training and strategies for incorporating play in the preschool classroom Ms. Tuk provided rich detail in describing coursework and workshops where the focus was on creating lessons with a focus on learning through play for children.

“They always tell us that children learn through play. So, um, they teach us different songs, poems, they teach us, um, sometimes different games that we can use in this classroom. Um, different little, em, hands-on things that we can do for them to use to play. And to help us to assess them.” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

The teacher training and workshops were significant in imparting to the preschool teachers the importance of children’s play as a modicum for learning. There, they gain the resources of songs, games, poems, rhymes, finger plays, and the like to both illustrate this point and to give them examples of what they should be doing in their classrooms to encourage educational play and practice in how to do so. Here the preschool teachers functioned in the role of learner in the interaction and community/institution planes of sociocultural development. The teachers learned a new way of covering preschool educational content using interaction and participation. This context of participatory learning stimulated Ms. Tuk to begin adopting play based teaching methods for her classroom. This example shows that Rogoff’s (1995) three planes theory is
applicable across the life span as well as the notion that new knowledge and information can influence members of a cultural community within newer and younger generations (Rogoff, 2003).

Another area discussed was an extension of Ms. Tuk experiences in the teacher training and workshops centered on children’s play. When asked if she found instances where she joined the children in their play Ms. Tuk shared that at times the children would ask her to join them in outdoor games. At other times, she would lead them in games on the playground. Still other times they were encouraged to play with one another as important opportunities to build social skills and also so that she could obtain observations of the children at play. When asked if she felt comfortable playing with the children she said yes it was something that came naturally as both a parent and a preschool teacher. She says that there are times that it is necessary to join the children and times when it is important to step out of the role of co-player and allow the children time to engage socially and learn individually through their play. She does mention her thoughts on joining the children at play:

“I think it’s much better when you join them. That they see you doing it, rather than me just telling them, ‘that, that.’ Because you have to show them how to do it.” (Ms. Tuk, Interview, 6/28/15)

This is in line with educational play, where teachers model behaviors conducive to learning. She mentions it is much more effective and intentional to demonstrate as a method of teaching than to simply instruct, especially at the preschool level.

**Commentary**

Data from case two provides additional evidence of a preschool teacher’s perceived affordances and constraints in the educational climate of Belize’s early childhood education system. There were culturally specific elements of learning taking place in Ms. Tuk’s classroom that highlights the significance of early childhood education for Belizean children from a cultural
learning viewpoint. Children received the benefit of not only foundational knowledge, and socialization, but also cultural learning and appropriation. Ms. Tuk instructs children on the significance of cultural symbols of Belize such as the national anthem, and Protestant religious ideals as a tenet of Belizean society. These are done in a developmentally and culturally appropriate fashion.

Ms. Tuk struggles in finding a balance between known educational and theoretical practices that are best suited in preschool and the academic approach to learning that is pushed down from the Ministry of Education. With a background in early childhood education, Ms. Tuk appears to permeate between DAP constructivist approaches to teaching the whole child, while falling back into academics-driven instruction during lessons. The didactic instruction approach is questionable as an effective teaching style for preschoolers. Movement from whole-group to small-group instruction is to be expected but was not observed. Ms. Tuk does encourage differentiated instruction as per DAP by tutoring student one-on-one in areas of individualized remediation.

Ms. Tuk also requires addition support in classroom management and special education. This remains a known issue for educators throughout the country. While many developing nations are in the same circumstances with special education services, Belize recognizes this issue and makes strides to include special education as part of their educational reform efforts every five years. Ms. Tuk identified one student that presented with behavioral challenges, but expressed a need to learn better ways of managing the entire classroom.

The next chapter summarizes the study data, and the themes that emerged from this study, and offers a discussion and commentary on the findings centered on answering the three research questions. The final chapter also discusses the strengths and limitations of this study and mentions further study opportunities.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In this study, the chosen preschool teachers shared their unique experiences and challenges to teaching in a specific cultural context in the developing nation of Belize. The study aimed to satisfy the following research questions:

1. How does a Belizean preschool teacher 1) describe and 2) enact the use of play in the classroom?

2. What are the positive early childhood practices currently in place in a Belizean preschool? What affords them and facilitates them?

3. What are the compromised early childhood practices in a Belizean preschool? What external constraints are present that contribute to the compromised practices?

These questions were addressed in the analysis of the data collected during this study and are presented here. The concepts of culture, the preschool teaching profession, and play were explored through preschool teachers’ practices and perspectives. Using observations, interviews, and documents in two cases, I was able to gain insights on current practices and beliefs, in relation to constraints and affordances experienced by each preschool teacher.

The overall findings of the case studies present social contextual information on how the participant schools are performing according to the goals for early childhood learning environments put forth by the Ministry of Education. These findings are pertinent to providing feedback on the current conditions of early childhood classrooms in Belize, in particular those that were mentioned in the study. The schools and preschool teachers were found to present with
benefits and affordances in addition to weaknesses and constraints in functionality, delivery, and effectiveness of ECE programming. The preschool teachers were also comparatively similar in program delivery but unique in personality, teaching styles, and educational attainment.

Specifically, I found that the study participants’ daily experiences illustrated a need for additional supports and added resources. The teachers functioned in an atmosphere that sought to increase program quality and teacher accountability without providing sufficient supports. Teaching materials, toys and games were limited in the classrooms where teachers expressed a desire to engage their students in educational and social play. The teachers also required more consistent training in play pedagogy to encourage more socially and cognitively beneficial interactions with the students while they played.

The research questions were answered by the data and analysis supplied in this study. Most helpful for answering question number one were the informal and formal interviews and participant observations. The teacher’s explanations of their beliefs and understandings regarding play, as well as observed practices, provided sufficient data to satisfy an inquiry of how Belizean preschool teachers describe and enact play in their teaching.

Regarding research question two, although other data provided supporting evidence, the research found it particularly helpful to focus on observational data compiled into vignettes. I generated the vignettes for the two cases that hopefully captured the rich, cultural practices of each teacher. The positive early childhood practices currently in place in Belizean preschools are culturally imbedded teaching that highlights national symbols and religious teaching. Preschool children benefit from starting their schooling experiences in a social setting that reinforces cultural learning already taking place in their homes and communities. Affordances of this benefit are teachers who are experienced in teaching young children and who possess funds of knowledge in
cultural markers specific to Belize. Teachers in this study went about teaching the children in ways that were age-appropriate and relevant to the children’s daily lives.

Most telling in helping to answer question three were the teacher’s accounts provided in informal and formal interviews, supplemented by photographs. The preschool teachers both explained frustrations and challenges in striving to meet the behest of the Ministry of Education. The compromised early childhood practices in these two Belizean preschools were instructional and programmatic and material limitations. The common concerns in this regard mentioned by both teachers were the restrictions placed on the daily schedule and the preschool curriculum. Mr. Cortés could not alter the daily schedule for the younger children although he found it too rigorous for this group of learners. Ms. Tuk could not move beyond the preschool curriculum, holding back her older preschoolers from learning new content. Indirectly, a lack of funds affected both teachers in furnishing their preschool classrooms with adequate toys and materials to stimulate their students. Other factors observed that compromised their practice were a high number of students to each teacher, limited supports in training for classroom management, special needs learners, and play pedagogy. The information supplied to satisfy this research question brought to light the Ministry of Education’s focus on academic rather than intellectual teaching, which encourages the constructivist approach to teaching the whole child.

The interview, observation, and artifact data from both case studies were processed using open coding and the following three themes were identified as significant to this study: (1) Cultural learning, (2) Improvisation due to limited resources, and (3) Play benefits and supports. These themes will be discussed according to their relevance to the study findings. I used the themes to categorize the study data into findings that were pertinent to the overall purpose of the study and to the research questions.
I identified the themes through careful consideration of the data set. I highlighted patterned codes during data processing that recurred in each case setting. They serve to inform the original research questions of inquiry and translate into the understanding and practice of play in preschool according to the two Belizean preschool teachers selected for this study.

**Finding 1: Both teachers spoke favorably about the role of play in preparing children for school, yet struggle with the knowledge, training, and resources in how to use play effectively in their teaching.**

First, the preschool teachers used play and embraced play by speaking favorably of play and incorporating playtime into their daily routines. Both teachers proclaimed that play contributed to learning and developmental outcomes for young children. They demonstrated their beliefs by allowing time in their daily schedules for children to engage in free, unstructured play, teacher-guided and teacher-directed play, outdoor play, and other forms of play.

Teachers’ planned activities using the daily schedule provided by the Ministry of Education helped to encourage play in these classrooms. Play variety was seen and the preschool teachers explained their views about play in several areas. The children were seen engaging in many types of play with varying levels of interaction from the teacher. However, as the previous two chapter noted, there was some lack of consistency in teacher interactions; this means that teachers seem to need added professional development support in how to interact with children at play and that children are currently not benefiting optimally from the complex interactions or play facilitation strategies of a skilled early educator.

**Play Benefits and Supports.** Mr. Cortés showed a high level of enthusiasm engaging children in the classroom. In Mr. Cortés’ preschool, the joy of learning was expressed through his warm, friendly nature with the children, his enthusiastic interactions with them and the fun, playful
activities they engaged in whether it was storytelling, songs and rhymes or games indoors or outdoors. His desire for the children to learn that school is a place to have fun, make friends and learn is expressed in the atmosphere of his classroom. Mr. Cortés displayed a caring attitude with his students, who expressed to them that school is a safe environment where they will be well cared for and supported as they learn and grow.

An essential component of a quality preschool program according to the Early Childhood Rating Scale (ECERS) is the relationship between the teacher and the child must be warm, friendly, and caring (Helmerhorst, Risken-Waldraven, Vermeer, Fukkink, & Tavechhio, 2014). Similarly, August (2010) conducted a study in Belizean preschools testing the ECERS scale, which was adjusted to the Belizean culture to the ECERS-B scale, to evaluate preschool quality. August found that teacher warmth and responsiveness was an area of concern that needed improvement.

Not so in Mr. Cortés’s classroom. As documented in an earlier chapter, he was warm and sensitive and responsive with the children and supported all levels of learners and encouraged them and challenged them getting them advancing beyond the skills of his classroom learning goals to work toward the next set of skills. Children that have mastered the alphabet were encouraged to move on to learning letter sounds and to begin reading simple words. Mr. Cortés believed that these children should move on to the next skills because he felt that they should not be allowed to experience boredom in school. Play–based teaching was often connected to academic goals, and school work but not in a tedious way. Youngsters should see school as a place that is fun, and they should enjoy coming to school each day. And as the case study showed, the children in Mr. Cortés’s preschool classroom did enjoy coming to school, were learning important skills, and cooperated well with practically everything in the curriculum and daily schedule. As Mr. Cortés
attested, “A child should be happy, I think that they should be happy all the time.” (Mr. Cortés, Interview, 6/16/15)

As the case study revealed, Ms. Tuk’s level-two preschool classroom was also as a site where the children engaged in a lot of hands on learning through play, and in a great deal of rich social interactions with one another and with the teacher. Ms. Tuk led the children in morning circle time outdoors that was interactive and featured song, movement, storytelling, and play. Indoors, Ms. Tuk encouraged children to engage in hands-on activities through art projects and educational games. She sought ways to teach via play, commenting about teaching the results of mixing colors, “They love…doing arts, painting. Especially when they have to mix one color with the next one, (...I can mix it and see what color it’s going to be!” (Formal interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/15)

She also created centers around the classroom where children can work individually or with classmates on educational games aimed to reinforce preschool skills in letters, numbers, shapes, and colors. The daily schedule in the preschool allowed for many opportunities for the children to engage in sustained, social play. These social interactions are moments where the children can continue to practice and develop the social skills such as inhibitory control, turn taking, sharing and conflict resolution that Ms. Tuk said is so important to being fully emotionally mature for primary school. She also showed playfulness by indulging children in games as a co-player:

“I would be here and they would ask me to sit down and that they will be the teacher. So I would pretend that ‘Oh, I don’t know what color is that’ so they will tell me, ‘Teacher, you can do it! Red! Look at it!’ And they would go and, just like how I go with them...(laughs). So, then I would start to play, just like how they do to me. And they’re ‘Teacher, teacher! Listen, you’re not listening!’ ‘You will see, just like that you don’t listen to me,’ I will tell them. So, and I would pretend that I don’t know what they ask me
so that they tell me and right there I can still do my observation of their knowledge.”
(Formal interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/16/15)

Studies show that regular, sustained play, particularly socio-dramatic play, allows for more engagement and better educational outcomes for children’s growth and development through play (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Van Hoorn et al., 2015). A period of at least thirty minutes of uninterrupted play allows for this type of engagement where social skills such as turn-taking and sharing as well as vocabulary development and problem-solving to take place. As demonstrated and described in the two preschool classrooms highlighted in this study, making time for meaningful play experiences helps children interact with their peers and reinforces learning of basic concepts. Mr. Cortés mentioned the time allotted for play in the interview:

“For the self-chosen activity…they should be playing – that is thirty minutes. And…we have the physical play, outdoor/indoor-So that is after we teach the lesson. Eh, that is fifteen minutes. That will be thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five minutes they will be playing…that we should be playing. But they are learning, and I am teaching.” (Formal interview, Mr. Cortés, 6/16/15)

Most play studies conducted in early childhood settings are mainly done in Western societies (Edmiston, 2008; Elkind, 2007; Gaskins, 2014; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). It was interesting to observe how educational play is supported and enacted in a developing nation such as Belize. The present research results suggest that the knowledge of play-based learning in early childhood in Belizean schools is emergent, stemming from the teachers’ previous teaching experiences and past memories of one’s own childhood. Formalized training or professional development in the forms of specific play pedagogy workshops, courses and training sessions are currently not available to Belizean early childhood teachers.

Nevertheless, both teachers displayed an understanding that play can serve as a bridge to learning between the early education years and primary grades. They understood without citing the literature or knowing about formal theories (they were not asked about this) that the early years
are also a time for children to explore their world in ways that they can navigate and that play helps them to do that. The teachers admirably if not in a polished way expressed their thoughts that play can help a child learn new skills and remain engaged and enthusiastic learners. One might say that the teachers’ belief systems about play were established, yet their practices needed apparently professional development support. Maybe training and education of teachers would also affect positively their beliefs and knowledge and judgments using play-based teaching and learning. Furthermore, the teachers did not explicitly mention a formalized knowledge and vocabulary of the developmental benefits of play just as they did not note any specific play theory or play-based learning strategies during interviews. Some of their teaching actions revealed this. They did not develop sophisticated play centers, such as a library with literacy-enhanced props. It seems that the teachers’ knowledge of play benefits and play theories and applications was informal or organic and developed over the years of their teaching and maybe even going back to their childhood.

The areas where each teacher in the present study displayed weaknesses in play pedagogy were in interactions with children during play. The teachers were mostly concerned with providing play opportunities such as free play in centers, outdoor play on the playground, and materials such as toys and props in the centers. The teachers had more of a hands-off approach toward interactions during times when children engaged in unstructured play. During this time, the teachers were seen completing paperwork, casually observing, and supervising the children and correcting or redirecting children’s behavior as needed. The both mentioned in their interviews that they do engage the children in play when they are leading a game or when a child asks them to play. They both confirmed that they were comfortable engaging young children in pretend play scenarios.

The levels of influence operative in the early educational settings of these two preschools affected how the teachers led their classrooms. At the macro level, the Ministry of Education set
forth policies that acted as constraints to the teachers’ planning and management. The teachers could not change the daily schedule, despite instances where doing so would better serve the children’s needs. The teachers had to adhere to the national preschool curriculum that was not well defined in some areas. The teachers were not provided with regularly and consistent training in play pedagogy. There was limited government support to fund the purchase of classroom materials such as toys that would greater facilitate the teacher’s use of play.

Affordances were few, but each teacher demonstrated a unique ability to overcome challenges presented by the aforementioned constraints. Mr. Cortés was limited in training, yet his natural inclination was to engage children in fun, stimulating activities. The children were able to benefit from Mr. Cortés’s playfulness. Ms. Tuk sought alternative ways of creating toys and crafts using reusable materials. Although she lacked materials she was eager to find new ways of providing children with hands-on learning experiences that she said they, “really enjoy.” The teachers functioned within their abilities in ways that were culturally developmentally appropriate.

**Improvisation Due to Limited Resources.** In the interviews, the teachers expressed their frustration with limited resources. Ms. Tuk mentioned that she would prefer to introduce packaged toys to her children to play with. She explained that she believed the children would gain more enjoyment and learn more from the toys she sees in catalogs.

She expressed a desire to obtain learning materials that she has seen online but are not available in Belize, or are available for purchase at a cost that exceeds a preschool teacher’s limited budget:

“Because I believe that if we would had the resources, more, well I said, I wish we have the resources. But, then financial or the money, to go buy that game, for us to play it. How much games we could buy, you know. Here in Belize it’s a bit expensive. So, um, for us to, to buy so that we can play this game today, maybe tomorrow another game. Rather than we have to create it, if we don’t if we don’t have the financial, money to go buy it.” (Formal Interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/2015)
Instead, Ms. Tuk regularly improvised with materials such as toys and art projects. Due to limited resources, she regularly used recycled materials to create games and crafts with the children in her classroom:

“Like, this year I did a caterpillar out of the egg trays. So, I cut them, and then I turn it over and I give it to do the eyes, and then I did like a little antennas with the leftover foam like that. And they stick it. And then I give them paint to paint it green. So, em, different little arts things that we would do. Like, the little toy that we did there. The car they would use it to play.” (Formal Interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/2015)

Ms. Tuk also demonstrated a lack of resources in the form of classroom management and differentiated instruction skills. She relied on family partnerships to manage difficult behavior in the classroom and passively ignored some students if they were off task:

“…This year I have some of them where, (exclaims) their behavior! Ah, like, the one who was sitting there. Oh my. Sometimes I would, ooh, get exhausted by midday I was exhausted with him already. So, like, whatever you tell him, it doesn’t work. So, his grandmother live right there, so she tells me, “when he doesn’t want to listen you tell him I’m right there by the window.”” (Formal Interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/2015)

Similarly, Mr. Cortés divulged a limited knowledge in formal play pedagogy training. The play-based activities that he engaged the children in were mostly improvisational. He led the children through common outdoor play games such as follow the leader, ring games, and sports. Indoors, he arranged play centers but did not regularly join children at play.

Mr. Cortés said that he had not attended a class or workshop that taught about the importance of play and how to engage children in meaningful play. It follows that he did not regularly engage children in conversations or interactions when they played indoors. His natural inclination as an early educator led him to engage children more in outdoor games. Mr. Cortés explains the missing resource of regular training sessions for early childhood educators in how to use play in the classroom to encourage learning and growth in young children.
Findings indicate that there were significant constraints on the daily experiences of the preschool teachers. There were areas identified through observations and participant interviews that indicate a need for improvements to the government provisions provided for Belizean preschool teachers. Areas such as improved professional development, a review of teacher to student ratios, and financial support for classroom supplies, materials, and toys/games would greatly improve the instruction these teachers could provide. It is likely that many more Belizean preschool teachers beyond this study could benefit from a comprehensive approach to improving services and supports nationwide. Although the conditions of the preschools presented in this study were less than favorable, the information collected shows that there is much that can be done to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. In addition, there were many indications of positive practices and behaviors that were seen to benefit the students.

Finding 2: Belizean preschool teachers engaged children in cultural learning experiences that shaped their cultivation of cultural identity and encouraged participation in cultural norms.

Cultural Learning. During observations, Mr. Cortés and Ms. Tuk demonstrated evidence of the desire to increase cultural knowledge in the children. Mr. Cortés used indirect strategies such as room arrangement, posters of key Belizean figures on the walls, and positioning of classroom furniture to impart knowledge of Belize’s education system to the students. More directly, Mr. Cortés engaged children in cultural learning through songs, lessons, activities and social interaction through modeling and conversations. Similarly, Ms. Tuk, engaged children in improvisational games such as follow the leader, “London Bridge” and “Duck, Duck, Goose” that are culturally appropriated British games.
The vignettes presented in this study describe how each teacher engaged their students in cultural learning experiences. Mr. Cortés used thematic units and lessons to lead discussions with the children on aspects of Belizean culture as noted in chapter four. For Mr. Cortés, it is important that the preschoolers are learning about concepts that are familiar and accessible in Belizean culture. He would like them to learn about the cultural symbols of Belize, the plants, animals, peoples, and in this case, transportation methods that they are likely to “see in their backyards.”

Ms. Tuk also corroborated the focus on Belizean culture in her teaching, although she explained it was due to her adherence to the national curriculum guide for preschool:

“It tells everything that you should be covering. And me, well, sometimes I add other things…as to Belize.” (Formal interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/2015)

As another element of cultural teaching, Ms. Tuk showed the children how a good citizen uses the national anthem and the pledge to Belize as national symbols. Both teachers engaged children in ways that led the children through the enculturation process that occurs in the early environments of the developing child. Ms. Tuk gave very explicit instructions in the singing of the national anthem:

“When you sing the national anthem of Belize you must stand straight and proud. Let me see you stand up straight” (Vignette 5.2, Ms. Tuk, Observation data, 6/20/15)

Ms. Tuk imparts cultural knowledge of the importance and delivery of the national anthem as a cultural symbol. The children are in the initial stages of cultural identity formation but these early experiences serve to influence their awareness of important cultural values such as these.

During the interviews, Mr. Cortés explained the culturally specific elements of his classroom teaching. He explained that he tries to keep the content of his lessons specific to Belizean culture so that children will remain engaged during the short time they are in his classroom. He also wanted to avoid confusing the children by introducing content that would be
irrelevant or nonexistent to the climate and culture of Belize. This focused teaching is conducive to culturally specific learning. It does limit the broader range of knowledge that young children can grasp. On the one hand, the children will gain a greater cultural awareness for the society in which they live. On the other hand, the children will not get a sense that there are worlds outside of their communities that are vastly different. It can be too limiting to shield children from world cultures at the risk of generating ethnocentrism (Rogoff, 2003; Shweder, 1991).

Finding 3: Preschool teachers in this study were not provided with the autonomy and necessary resources to enact appropriate early childhood practices for their pupils.

The teachers showed a desire to perform at the government’s higher level of expectations for early childhood by following the preschool curriculum and meeting evaluation requirements. However, they expressed a tension between the outward expectations and their own knowledge of appropriate ECE practices. While the MOE held a high standard of academic rigor in preschool, the teachers knew that the children needed additional support in areas such as social-emotional development. The teachers sought a balance between academics, play, and social learning by engaging their students in educational play opportunities but also lacked the resources and training to adequately do so. The constraints placed on these teachers’ classrooms were reflected in their lack of adequate resources and their limited training in classroom management and differentiated instruction. The teachers also reported feeling limited in making changes to their program, such as the daily schedule, despite the benefits such decision might have on the children they serve.

Mr. Cortés explained that he believes children should be taught according to their level:

“I think that…you should move them along. The ones that already master it, I think that you should push them a little farther, to not to keep them back. Cause they are going to feel bored after a little while? Showing so many times the word, ‘Sam, Sam, Sam,’ they will be bored. So, we will have to show them, ‘Sam…sat.’ ‘Sam…is sad.’ And eventually the others that are behind, will begin to recognize the word, ‘Sam.’ And the letters in there. So, I think that you should, you should push them. If they
know it, push them a little farther.” (Formal Interview, Mr. Cortés, 6/16/15)

Despite these beliefs, Mr. Cortés explained that an evaluator told him not to teach beyond the national preschool curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum only instructed teachers to teach the alphabet and letter sounds, but not simple words and sentences.

The influence can also be negative for Mr. Cortés who is challenged to keep up with 32 preschoolers engaged in active learning while also being prevented from introducing more cognitively stimulating subject matter. Like most classes have, Mr. Cortés said that he has children who have advanced beyond the alphabet and are bored reviewing letters. Consequently, he is not serving the best interest of the children by keeping a close adherence to the Ministry’s curriculum. This can be judged as a negative influence that directly affects the child.

The teachers in this study were also provided little to no opportunities to observe other seasoned early childhood teachers to improve their own practices. Ms. Tuk mentioned the desire to visit other classrooms to see how preschool teachers arrange the room, prepare materials and follow the same routine. This practice is missing in the existing structure of Belizean early childhood education. Ms. Tuk explained her limitations in visiting other classrooms to gain new tips and strategies to use in her preschool:

“Well, this year the University wants to do is to, to do like a Montessori. But, I want to get my trays. ‘Cause I went to a Montessori school and I saw most of the things are on trays. Like puzzles, they’re on little trays and the children will get the trays. They go to the table they do it or they go on the mat and they do it. Then the put it up again and they put up the tray. Like, it’s more organized. And I want to do like more different games, that I have in mind. For this new year. After I went to visit that school, I got a lot of different ideas. And the thing is that, um, well I don’t know about you guys up there but here it’s like more difficult. Because we are in the school all day. And the only free day that we have is like during the weekend. And then weekend schools are not open so that you can go check their school and get ideas and see how they do that poster or the other things.” (Formal Interview, Ms. Tuk, 6/28/2015)
Suggestions

During this study, the exploration of preschool teachers’ notions of play and the current climate of early childhood education in Belize were the main foci of observations, interpretation, and analysis. This examination of the current methods and practices utilized in two early education classrooms in Belize also highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of program implementation currently in place in these preschools. Areas such as play supports, differentiated instruction, cultural learning and teaching the whole child appear to be positive aspects of the early childhood program in Belize; yet there are some areas of improvement to be made.

First, the focus on improving teacher quality and training in areas such as play strategies and classroom management should continue nationwide at the early childhood level. Second, increased access to teaching materials could also greatly improve the teachers’ ability to plan play-based lessons. The lack of appropriate toys and games and economic stress of having to purchase classroom materials out of pocket could be addressed with government provisions for the preschools. The Ministry of Education boasts that government expenditure on education is the highest in all nations in Central America (MOE, 2012). Based on this fact, the Ministry of Education should consider allocated a set number of funds toward the purchase of classroom materials for early childhood educators to teach effectively. Lastly, an evaluation of the enrollment numbers and teacher to student ratio would result in a plan of action to improve these numbers. This could greatly reduce the daily stress levels of the teachers observed.

The preschool teachers represented in this study expressed concerns about areas in their teaching. The teachers feel limited in their ability to teach, particularly through play, with few engaging materials for their preschoolers. The preschool teachers showed a mixed understanding of play as an instructional tool and their role in incorporating play in the classroom as part of their
instruction. The teachers also expressed a desire to gain more training and skills in many areas including play pedagogy, classroom management, and special education. The two teachers explained that teaching materials and toys or games for the preschool children were scarce. This made planning activities that were engaging and educational a challenge. The lack of resources was evident during observations of each classroom. The teachers were also overburdened by a high number of students in attendance during my school visits. Although Mr. Cortés had an assistant teacher during the morning session, the ratios were still out of proportion with thirty-six students to two teachers.

Ms. Tuk did not have a teacher’s aide, but her classroom still had thirty-two students enrolled and an average of up to twenty students in attendance during observations. Classroom space was more limited in Ms. Tuk’s classroom than Mr. Cortés’s. Both teachers regularly used the available large, outdoor spaces to conduct whole-group activities.

The study findings suggest that preschool teachers view their role in child development is significant; however, they need added support in pedagogical training, obtaining classroom materials and peer support/mentorship. The teachers could potentially benefit from a framework like DCAP to support them in making good decisions for their students, unique to their cultural backgrounds.

Current educational reform in Belize includes the goal to improve teacher training and increase the number of trained and certified teachers. The early childhood teachers in Belize are among the lower end of educated and certified teachers. The two teachers observed for this study did have education and certification and were continuing to receive training in early childhood education to improve their practice. They appear to be the exception with only about 7% of preschool teachers in Belize reported as trained and certified in education in 2016 (MOE, 2016).
Ms. Tuk mentioned that she received training in how to prepare play-based lessons for young children through coursework at the local university. She explained that is where she was told that children “learn through play.”

Teachers that are aware of the importance of play are more likely to adopt a play-based structure to their classrooms and lessons. In a study conducted by Ridgway and Quinones (2015) preservice teachers’ perceptions of play pedagogy were evaluated in agreement with the new Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) adopted in Australia:

The EYLF suggests that educator guidance in sustaining play is essential for learning, child development, and quality service provision in early childhood. To support this thinking our students worked in field placements and from their experiences and course readings generated their new models of play. The notion of providing a strategy to support students’ professional development is important. We believed the conceptualization of a model of play would give students a tool for making theoretical and practical connections to the workforce world that they were about to enter. (p. 29)

In this study, the students described their changing attitudes toward play based learning by taking play pedagogy courses and explained how they envisioned adopting play into their future instruction. In this study, the importance of training a force of new teachers that have received coursework and training on the importance of play and how to enact play pedagogy is essential to a developmentally appropriate early learning framework. Additionally, Almon (2013) furthers her suggestions for how to improve preschool teachers’ acceptance of play based learning, “Create opportunities for teachers to learn about play in early education from mentors, visits to programs with effective play-based approaches, and workshops” (p. 15). Through regular exposure, observation and training preschool teachers can learn to adopt these strategies of play-based education.

It follows from observations that Ms. Tuk embraced play in her classroom and this seems likely due to her prior educational experiences and training opportunities. Conversely, Mr. Cortés
said he did not receive training on play in early education in his certificate program, but he learned that play was a central component of learning in the young children through his teaching and observations over the years. Ms. Tuk also shared that she recently visited a Montessori preschool that had opened in Belize and marveled at the organization of the toys and centers and she hoped to adopt some their ideas. Hence both teachers had informal education on this important topic.

This speaks to the need to provide preschool teachers in Belize with more opportunities to observe other classrooms and teachers’ practice. From observing one another and learning new ways of teaching they can provide one another with a support network that will continue to improve their own teaching strategies. Perhaps an exemplary preschool classroom and teacher can be identified in the country or even in each district and designated as a “master classroom” or “master teacher” for all other preschool teachers to be supported in visiting, observing, and learning from at regular intervals throughout the school year.

**Strengths**

The study benefitted from the overall qualitative case study design that allowed me to collect data in many forms within each case. The investigative, descriptive nature of qualitative research provided information unique to each case and triangulated from different data sources. The answers to the research questions are specific to the study sites and participants but provide significant findings toward the nationwide efforts for improvement of early childhood educational services in Belize. The three main research questions received similar but differently nuanced answers in the two case studies.

An additional strength of this study was my similar cultural background to the study participants. This facilitated not only gaining access but also becoming a part of the community, an accepted and understanding presence. There was mutual trust from the beginning and a shared
understanding. This gave me an insider’s view to bypass the necessary step of learning about a new or foreign culture of investigation. I was familiar with the educational system of Belize, having been raised by Belizean parents, lived in Belize for several years, and attended Belizean schools. This insider view (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999) allowed me to recognize and understand the deep structure of several aspects of Belizean culture evident in the case studies. The national symbols, climate and natural resources, languages spoken, and ethnic backgrounds of the people in the study were familiar to me and did not require additional study. (See Appendix J for my researcher’s biographical sketch).

**Limitations**

Although much was learned during this study’s undertaking, some questions were raised during the analysis and discussion. With the value of hindsight, there are some additional sources of data that I would have liked to collect. Demographical information might have been collected on the children in each case, namely the socioeconomic status of each household and parent occupations. The background knowledge of each teacher in the areas of child development and educational theory could have been questioned specifically. I could have also asked each teacher how typical the observed behaviors and practices were for clarity and consistency.

Some additional limitations of this study included the time and resources to continue collecting data in the field. The data collection period was limited to the two months scheduled during the summer of 2015. The timing of my visit was also a limitation as the observations in the classrooms occurred during the final weeks of classes out of the entire school year. This limitation was offset by the conversations recorded with the classroom teachers as the primary resource of information on how the school year commenced. The discussions and interviews collected served as a reflection for the teachers to look back and describe the entire school year. During these
discussions, the teachers showed me artifacts of their events, lessons, projects and activities with the children through pictures or items kept.

Lastly, the scope of the project and the limited resources limited this study to sustain a longer presence in the setting. Ideally, the study could have been greatly informed by more data in the form of additional observational hours logged in the study sites. This study was scaled down in scope to be financially feasible and time-sensitive. Findings of this study are still significant and reveal important details of how two teachers in Belize view play’s role in early education and factors that lead to school readiness. Further study findings provide useful feedback on Belize’s current progress toward meeting educational reform goals for the expansion of early childhood education. Time and logistical constraints also prevented visiting the Early Childhood Division of the Ministry of Education further questioning regarding the national early childhood curriculum, the yearly reviews and the limitations placed on the classroom teachers as mentioned in the study. Also, I wanted to discuss the source of their knowledge on best practices in early education and their curriculum guide. Finally, I wanted to inquire about the current goals for the future of early childhood education expansion in the area of increasing facilities, improving existing facilities, acquiring resources and materials, increasing enrollments and attendance and improving teacher training and certification. I desire to pursue these areas of inquiry following the completion of this project to expand my knowledge beyond this study.

Further Study

This study could be expanded to a longer data collection period of an entire school year in the preschools, with more observational data obtained and several interviews scheduled with classroom teachers. Furthermore, the study can be expanded to include more study sites across the
country. It might be beneficial to record classroom teaching and play back video for teachers to gain their insights into their own practices and reflect on their decisions and behaviors in the classroom. More demographical data on Belizean preschool students can be collected in future iterations of this study. Details such as students’ chronological ages, greater details of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and parents’ occupations, academic progress reports, attendance records, and birth order might prove pertinent to a follow up study.

Also, it would be of interest to follow a group of preschool children from one class into the Infant I grade to replicate and expand this study. Interview data collected from Preschool and Infant I teachers could be compared and analyzed to test whether children who attended preschools gain any of the mentioned benefits of this study and improve learning outcomes in primary school. The study could also be expanded to include parents, caregivers and/or family members that have a vested interest in the early education of the child. Interviewing and observing families at home in addition to the preschool that the children can serve as a comparative method of gaining an overall understanding of how Belizean teachers and families prepare their children for school culturally.

Final Comments

This study endeavored to describe the preschool teachers’ notions about play and its use in teaching practices for their preschool children. The two Belizean preschool teachers observed fully embraced play and believed that it is important in preparing children for primary school. They viewed social skills as equally important to academic skills. These data show that the teachers have a basic understanding of play pedagogy and an emerging practice of using play in their early childhood classrooms. Play was not the central focus of teaching in the early childhood classrooms
observed in this study. Play was incorporated in many of the classroom experiences provided by the teachers observed.

Teachers in the two preschool classrooms observed in this study demonstrated their use of play in their preschools by engaging young students in playful games, songs, and rhymes throughout the day, allowing time for free play in academically enriched learning centers and during outdoor play, and providing materials and props to enrich play centers. Teachers in this study were aware of the need to make opportunities for play but did not display an advanced understanding of teacher interactions during play. The teachers displayed several of the known teacher roles during play such as onlooker, uninvolved, co-player, and stage director. Teachers provided children with games and materials, such as puzzles, during the observation periods. Interactions with children did not show a sophisticated method of engaging children in conversations during play.

During interviews, the teachers mentioned that play is important to the growth and learning of young children. Ms. Tuk explained that she learned how to use play in designed lessons and materials during training and coursework at the local university. Mr. Cortés mentioned that he did not receive formal training in how to incorporate play into his teaching. Instead, he relied on experience and his students’ interests. Both teachers shared that they were comfortable playing with young children and that it was important for them to explain the use of play in the preschool classroom to parents. Both teachers felt that play was a very useful tool in preparing children for the skills and behaviors needed to show school readiness.

These teachers experienced constraints due to the influence of the macrosystem, represented by the Ministry of Education, on the microsystem, represented by their preschool classrooms. These constraints influenced how they could practice what they knew to be effective
teaching and classroom management. As a result, these constraints directly affected the developing children in the classrooms. These practices could be addressed to improve the daily experiences of the preschool teachers and positively impact the students affected. This document could serve as a source of information on how Belize’s efforts at early childhood expansion have manifested in each case study. It is offered at a critical period where study findings and suggestions could be used as constructive feedback on new areas of focus for improvement of Belizean preschools nationwide.

This study is significant in learning ways that individual educators in developing nations such as Belize view and approach issues that preschools face in other nations of the world. Important is to have evidence-informed answers to the question of how to do ECE, how to prepare young children for school and life from a culturally specific point of view. The study adds to the body of literature available addressing preschool teachers of developing nations’ understandings about play, the use of play in preschool teaching practices and the role of outside influences that impede the abilities of early educators to provide quality educational experiences to young children through play. Studies such as these can be used to provide useful feedback on the current challenges and needs of early educators in Belize, such as those included in this study. Such feedback can be used to begin opening channels of communication to support the efforts at early childhood education expansion currently underway in Belize.
References


Appendix A

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Culturally specific School Readiness Practices: Parents' and Teachers' Perspectives on School Readiness in Belize

Principal Investigator: Krysta Murillo, Graduate Student
Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802
(610) 396-3150; lkm177@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. James Johnson
145 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 865-2230; jej4@psu.edu

Other Investigator(s):

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to explore parents' and teachers' understanding and practice of school readiness within their own cultural setting. This study also aims to collect evidence and artifacts of play as facilitative of school readiness practices in cultural settings.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to complete a questionnaire. You will also be asked to participate in at least two interviews, one initial interview and one (possible) follow-up interview. In addition, I may also ask to visit your home or school and observe your interaction with a young child.

3. Duration: It will take about 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The interviews will take approximately 60-120 minutes. Informal observations will take between 30 to 60 minutes.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at 313 Gaige Building in a locked file. The data collected in this study will be stored for five years after which, all data will be destroyed. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Identities of all participants involved in this research will be protected, all names of participants and locations of school will be changed in any written communication of this study. Care will be taken to present any identifiable information shared in this study to protect participant identities.

5. Right to Ask Questions: Please contact Krysta Murillo, principal investigator at (281) 804-2031 with questions or concerns about this study.
6. **Payment for participation:** Participants will be entered to win a gift card valued at $50US for an educational learning toy. One parent and one teacher will each receive a $50 gift card ($100 total) to purchase an educational learning toy of their choice to enhance play, learning and school readiness for the young children in their lives.

7. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

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

______________________________________________  __________________

| ____ Participant Signature | Date |

______________________________________________  __________________

| ____ Person Obtaining Consent | Date |
The Pennsylvania State University Consent Form for Preschool Stakeholder Interview

Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research

Dear Participant:

My name is Krysta Price-Murillo, I am doctoral candidate at the Pennsylvania State University in the College of Education. As part of my degree requirements I am conducting a study to explore the role of play in school readiness from preschool teachers’ perspectives in Belize. The study will include observations of preschool teachers, and interviews with key stakeholders. I am interested in finding out the attitudes of teachers toward play in preparing children for formal schooling, the expectations of preschool teachers of the key areas of readiness in preschool children, and the activities that preschool teachers engage in regularly to prepare children for school. This information will be used to consider recommendations on improving communications between parents and teachers on the expectations of each party and how children can benefit from play activities designed to prepare them for formal schooling in elementary and primary grades. I would appreciate your participation.

As part of this study, I would like to conduct an interview with you for about 2 hours at your convenience. I have ten open-ended questions that I have prepared addressing school readiness and play. During our conversation, I will be taking notes of our discussion, and with your permission, I would like to record the details of our conversation using an audio recorder. Audio tapes will be reviewed only by me and my dissertation committee upon their request and these will be destroyed immediately after the finalization of my dissertation.

After the interview and following my transcriptions of our conversation, I will provide you with a copy of the data that I have transcribed for you to review. Following your revision of the transcript, you may return it to me. You may take the opportunity to revise, make additions or deletions or clarifications as you see fit. I will discuss any changes that you wish to make and acknowledge and accept the changes in the final draft of the interview transcript.

I do not anticipate the study will present any medical or social risk to you other than you offering your time to participate in the interview.

While there may be no immediate benefit to you, I anticipate that the results of this study will help to provide insight into the culturally unique ways that parents and teachers may have prepare children for school in Belize. Your participation can serve as an example of practices that can be instilled to encourage parents and teachers to work together on beneficial outcomes of school readiness for preschoolers.

Data from this study may be published or used in publications. However, your name and institution/organization will be kept strictly confidential. I will not release information on your or anyone else in a way that could identify you or your institution/organization.

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. No monetary or non-monetary compensation will be provided. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which
you are entitled. If you want to withdraw from the study at any time you may do so without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. The information you have provided up to that point will be destroyed.

You will be provided with the opportunity to consult with me on potential findings and will have the opportunity to read the final report upon completion if you wish. At any point during or after the study you may contact me or the dissertation chair with any questions or concerns:

Krysta Murillo
Reading,
Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania State University- Berks Campus
(610) 396-3150
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Dr. James E. Johnson (Dissertation Chair)
243 Chambers Bldg.
Pennsylvania State University
State College, PA
(814) 234-3154
Email: jej4@psu.edu
Sample Interview Script - Teachers

(Greetings)

Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down and speak to me about your teaching for this interview. I had the opportunity to look over your survey results and I’m really excited to talk to you about some of your answers. I know your time is valuable so I will get started, ok?

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? Great, first I have a set of questions I’d like to ask you about school readiness.

Question 1. Tell me a little bit about a normal day in your classroom.

Question 2. That’s neat! How do you feel about the progress of your class?

Question 3. Wow. Do you feel satisfied with the participation level of parents of your preschoolers?

Question 4. Interesting. So tell me about the activities or lesson students enjoy the most.

Question 5. That’s awesome! How much time do your students spend playing during the day?

Question 6. Ok. And how much do you interact with the students as they are playing?

Question 7. I see. How much was play a factor in your training/education?

Question 8. Do you feel confident in directing or joining young children as they play? Question 9. What do you believe is most important in preparing children for school? Question 10. Do parents expectations of school readiness match your own
## Appendix D - Codes and Themes

### Interview #1: Mr. Roberto Cortés’s Preschool Classroom – Semilla Protestant Primary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Supporting Quotes</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>“We have a curriculum and we need to follow that curriculum. We divide the curriculum in ten different topics.”</td>
<td>Important to have a plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lesson</td>
<td>“The lesson is the one that we focus mostly. So, if we are going to teach about the numbers, we need to do something with the number ten. We need to sing, a song with the number ten we need to do different activities using the number ten”</td>
<td>Curriculum leads to planned lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Healthy snack</td>
<td>“After that we have the snack, and that’s where they, they sit and eat their snack. It should be a healthy snack! (laughing) But some parents give their child a sweet or biscuit.”</td>
<td>Nutrition important to learning</td>
</tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>“There is the lesson oriented activity, where they’re going to work. We are going to color, a number ten or they’re going to count around an umbrella or something that will help them to remember the lesson.”</td>
<td>Play activities support learning in Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>“And then, em, mm, if they have something to tell you they’ll tell you, they’ll tell you on that time. Sometimes you call it, em, ‘News Time.’ And they will inform you about something going on with them and their family or something that they did during the day or during the weekend.”</td>
<td>Important to provide a bridge from home to school for families and children starting in preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Play=Learning</td>
<td>“For the self-chosen activity they should be playing – that is thirty minutes. And, eh, we have also, ehh, fifteen minutes, after the lesson – I skipped that one, see? We have the physical play, outdoor/indoor- So that is after the, the, we teach the lesson. Eh, that is fifteen minutes. That will be thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five minutes they will be playing…that we should be, we, should be playing. But they <em>are</em> learning. But they are learning and I am teaching.”</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Self-chosen activity</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>So at the beginning of the day, they’re going to come in class and they’re going to have the self-chosen activity where they’re going to be playing…in different areas of the, in the class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Focus on Belize</td>
<td>Cultural specific pedagogy</td>
<td>“Well we try to focus only on Belize. For example, when we are talking about the weather I don’t mention, em – It’s uh, we don’t mention, “It’s a snowy day!” No. Because we are- Not going to experience. Even though some chi-children, they see it on TV, they talk about it at home. Ah, they see pictures about it. But we don’t focus on that. We only focus here, uh, things about Belize. And also when we are teaching about, em, transportation we have to tell them, we- I mention them about a train, but here in Belize there’s no train.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Parent participation</td>
<td>Home/School Connection</td>
<td>Families</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Parent Role</td>
<td>Home/School Connection</td>
<td>Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Playing teacher</td>
<td>Play=Learning</td>
<td>“Some of them, they think that they they will act as the teacher. And they will be telling you, “Ehh, tell me what is this color?” and the others are telling them – that color is blue, that color is red.”</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Fixed schedule/Set curriculum</td>
<td>Ministry mandates</td>
<td>“It was, it is given to us like that. Ministry is...give it to us. There was a point that we were, teachers, preschool teachers were asking if we could change the different hours of our schedule. But they said no, that we cannot change it. Because, it is very hard to follow that schedule in the afternoon session.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schedule cannot be altered</td>
<td>Schedule is mandated by Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Play leader</td>
<td>Teacher Role during Play</td>
<td>“The only time that we’re going to play is when, for the physical, for the physical play. When we go outside or we stay inside. In a game. And I’m telling them what to do. Then I will be with there. But in the self chosen activity they are going to do it by themselves.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher leads children during teacher-led play activities</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>Teacher role during play</td>
<td>“I would be just...observing them.. Maybe I think them a little while and telling them what to do. They uh, they play more with their friends.”</td>
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<td>Teacher at times observes children during play</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Helper</td>
<td>Teacher role during play</td>
<td>“Or if I see them struggling with a puzzle, or, or em, beading something? Well, I will show them but that will be it.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher sometimes helps children during play when needed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Coplay not prohibited</td>
<td>Teacher role during play/Cultural specific pedagogy</td>
<td>“Maybe that is what the children...think. They see this is the teacher, he will not be here involving with us. He will be just watching us. Maybe that is how, how they feel. But in reality, here in Belize, I don’t think that this, that is something that it is, em, like how we call, how can we say, prohibited? For us to join them.”</td>
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<td>Teachers not discouraged to play with children; children see teacher as a co-player (no cultural barriers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Children seek out teacher</td>
<td>Teacher/student relationship</td>
<td>“Some of-some of them if they get really attached to you, then, they will come, they will hug you, they will be around you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Children are selfish with toys</td>
<td>Social skill building</td>
<td>“I have seen it happen when they are the only child in the family. Sometimes, they do it because they are selfish. They just want the toys for themselves. They don’t want to play with others. I am going to get close to him and I will tell him, ‘Go and play with him, he will share with you, don’t be by yourself. Try to be with others.’”</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Teach children to socialize</td>
<td>Social skill building</td>
<td>“That is a, um, strong point that we try to do here in preschool. For them to socialize with each other. We try to teach them how to do this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Teacher models play entry</td>
<td>Social skill building/Teacher role during play</td>
<td>“I will tell him, “Go and play with him, he will share with you, don’t be by yourself. Try to be with others.” And eventually they’re going to start to play with...one friend, two friends, then they’re going to be start to playing with other friends here in, in the preschool.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Village is small; know families</td>
<td>Cultural context</td>
<td>“The thing here is that the village is small. And we know each other.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Family background</td>
<td>Home/School Connection</td>
<td>Families</td>
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<td>“And we know things that happen and we know their background. I, well I, know the background of the different children. And it affects them a lot. And it affect-there are different problems that families encounter that when they-the child comes to school, you can see how it affects them. So, being in a village I think that is good because we, we know the background of the different parents.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>23</th>
<th>Family inventory</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Teacher intentionality</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“When they are going to register in preschool we give them a form. We give them a form. But that is not so much in detail. Just like for example, the job of the mother, the job of the dad. How many, em, members are in their family. If he has a sickness or something like that.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<p>|    | Family context important for teacher to know, families should communicate changes to teacher | Teacher takes time to get to know families at start of year, to plan learning activities more effectively |
| 24 | Supporting emotional development | Integrated curriculum | it goes hand in hand with our daily, our daily time here in school. You can, because you, you will see the child, you “Will see the, he behaves or she behaves. And you will try to, to mend their behavior. If their…or if they’re feeling afraid you need to find why they’re feeling are afraid. And you need to tell their parents. If their parents are doing something wrong at home, you need to tell them. Because you, here in pres- I think that, that children, eh, there, you can see the different attitude that the child comes to school. A child should be happy. Not worrying about anything! I think that they should be happy all the time, so I think that, that, we-this, being a preschool teacher helps them in both the academic and the- and their emotional.” | Emotional development integrated in curriculum through opportunities to share and grow emotionally |
| 25 | Parent coaching | Home/School connection | “And sometimes, I, tell them. This is not the only place where you need to be with your child. You need to have, well, you need to go, when he goes to primary school you need to be there with him also. When he moves to high school, not because he is so big, you’re not going to be around him, helping him. You should be there throughout all his or her education. Some of them will come and will tell you, ‘Teacher, in what can I help my child at home, what can I do?’ And I will, eh, tell them what to do, tell them to…read them a book, or be with them, recalling their colors. Or anytime they have free to just sit with them and tell them to count with them or something like that.” | Parents have a resource in preschool teacher to assist them in helping the student beyond classroom |</p>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Parent communication</td>
<td>Home/School connection</td>
<td>Families</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If you see that there is a problem with your child, you need to tell the parents and the parents will, will, will tell you what is going on and you will encourage the parents and advise them on what to do, not to do things in front of the child that will affect him.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parents can communicate regularly with teacher throughout the school year</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Limited play pedagogy training</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>“I have not encountered not one course that is, has taught me on how to play with children”</td>
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<td>Teachers not trained specifically on how to play with children</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Child-centered</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>“The only thing they have focused a lot, em, to be child-centered. To be child-centered. To involve the child as much as possible in your, in your activities. To make them be the ones learning by themself and you guiding them…to their learning.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teachers are taught to have a child-centered approach to teaching preschool</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Experience with children</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>“Something that I, maybe this is what helped me a lot to be here in preschool- Is because, from a very early age, like for, I was like, only ten years old, when they asked me to help them in Sunday schools at church. So from that day on I was helping, assisting another person, being around smaller kids. I think that, all of those times that I pass there in Sunday school helped me to be the teacher that I am today right here.”</td>
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<td>Preschool teacher’s prior experiences (Sunday school) with children aided in teaching methods</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Making friends; Part of a group</td>
<td>School readiness skills</td>
<td>“I think that they should…they should know how to, to, to be with each other They should ha-they should learn that…in school, it’s a place where</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making friends; Learning to be part of a group – social skills (SR Importance*)</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>School=place to learn</td>
<td>School readiness skills</td>
<td>“They should learn that...in school, it's a place where you're going to learn.”</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Academics: colors, shapes, numbers, letters, write name</td>
<td>School readiness skills</td>
<td>“So these are the things that I, think that we should, we prepare in preschool. Plus, the, the basic things like colors, shapes, numbers, and the letters. Those are- and their names also. There are, when they go to primary school, the first thing that they are going to start all over again will be with their numbers, with their names and with their letters. And if they come to preschool this will be nothing new for them. They will already have that background on that. This will be, they will not find it so difficult when they go there, because they will already know something. Even though, if they don’t learn how to write it, they will recognize that, that is a number and that is a shape. So when go there, this is what I try to teach them here in preschool.”</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>Respect for teachers</td>
<td>School readiness skills</td>
<td>“It’s a place that you need to, to respect the teacher and to obey the teacher.”</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>Different levels, push them farther</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction</td>
<td>“I think that...you, you should move them. You should move them along. If you, you saw this, em, some of- not all of them were reading. Some of them, they were reading the words. But I show the, the words to everybody. Because I know that some of them will not read it, but they will recognize that is the letter ‘S’. They will learn the pattern of how to read from this side, to Pushing students to learn content beyond “grade level”</td>
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</table>
that side. So, even even that they are not on the same level, they are learning something. And the ones that already master it, I think that you should push them a little, a little, em, farther. For them to, to not to keep back. Cause they are going to be feel, they will feel bored after a little while? For showing so many times the word, ‘Sam, Sam, Sam,’ they will bo-bored. So you-we will have to show them, ‘Sam…sat.’ ‘Sam…is sad.’ And eventually the others that are behind, will begin to recognize the word, ‘Sam.’ And the letters in there. So I think that you should, you should push them. If they know it, push them a little farther.”

| 35 | Meeting with parents | Parent expectations | “The first thing that we do when school open is we have a meeting with the parents. And we explain them what we are going to be teaching here in preschool. And at the end, what they should accomplish. So, it should match what parents are expecting from, from what we do. But I always tell them ‘If you don’t put your-if the parents don’t put their part, don’t expect that the teacher will do all the work. Because we need to work…together.’ Together.” | Teacher regularly communicates child’s progress with parents |
| 36 | Assessment booklets | Assessment | “And some of them, you had time to see the, em, assessment booklets? And…even though there are some, some boxes that says, em, IM? It’s ‘In progress.’ And some of them will say, ‘A,’ means ‘acquired’. Some parents will find it, will say, “But my child doesn’t has an ‘A’ here…” I will tell them, ‘Yes, because Assessment booklets used to measure student progress, communicate achievements with parents |
he’s, he has not acquired it. But he is in progress, he is learning it little by little. And he will need help from you at home, and me here in school. That we are going to do it.’ So at the end, once I think that they are ‘in progress’ I think that is good for me and for the child. Because, they are seeing that there is a progress in them. They are not staying stagnant in one place, but they are moving.”

| 37 | Play is child’s nature | Play and School Readiness skills | “Yes, because that is their nature. Children they just love to play, they just love to be moving around. And right now…living in the, in a, in a…digital era, we can say… They’re playing their tablets, they’re playing the different activities there in their tablet. But you can find those, em, ‘apps’ that will help them develop their reading skills, their math skills. And, they will be playing and they will be learning. So playing in definitely a big part in preparing a child when, when moving to primary school. And not only focusing on the digital, em, things that we have here. But, also, you can play together, em, go outside, do outdoor games, do indoor games and they will help them. Teaching, when we teach about body parts there’s the ‘Hokey Pokey’ ‘You put your right hand in’. They will be telling you, they will be showing you which hand, where is your hand. You put your head in, they will be moving their head- Put a game and they’re going to be playing. And, em, they will be moving | Play is natural to children, work of children |
and they will be, be learning. So, they will, play is ver-play is very important.”

| 38 | Informing parents of play benefits | Parents’ expectations | Communicating with parents | Play=learning | “I tell parents, you are going to be see that your children be playing. Because some of them tell, they believe that preschool is a just a place where they go ‘play, play, play’ and I tell them, ‘Yes! We are going to play! But they will be learning. They will learn something, when on that play they will be doing.’ So play is important, it’s very important.” | Teacher finds it important to communicate play benefits to some parents who expect more academic content in preschool |
## Appendix E – Codes & Themes

### Interview #2: Ms. Pamela Tuk’s Preschool Classroom – Toucan Preschool, Belmopan

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<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Supporting Quotes</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>“We, um, we have a curriculum that we follow.”</td>
<td>Ministry mandates instruction content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from Ministry</td>
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<td><strong>K.M.</strong>: And the curriculum is given to level one as well? From the Ministry? For three year olds?</td>
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<td><strong>P.T.</strong>: Yes! Mhmmm. It’s two...curriculum.</td>
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<td>It’s marked here. Level two.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>It says everything that you should be covering.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Weekly scale</td>
<td>“So we will and out of that curriculum we will do a weekly scale and then we will plan what we will teach for each day.”</td>
<td>Using curriculum to plan instruction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Planning with curriculum</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Free play</td>
<td>“So what we will do for circle time, first is free play, then after free play, what we will do for circle time”</td>
<td>Set time in schedule for play; play supported</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for play</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Corners</td>
<td>“When it’s free play is when they go to the different corners. They get familiar with the different corners every day. We change things in the corners. Then, em, they move to, from corner to corner. At the beginning, I help them to familiarize with the different corners.”</td>
<td>Play and learning integrated in environment</td>
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<td>Opportunities for play</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Academic activity</td>
<td>Learning focus</td>
<td>Example</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Writing letters/tracing letters</td>
<td>Academic learning</td>
<td>“Well I write whatever I see that they have difficulty…maybe like let’s say writing their first letter of their names. I would write it there, and then I give, I – if I have, ah, mar-white board marker. I do it on the paper first, and then I slide it in, and then they just like they trace over it. And they will get, the letter that maybe they have difficulty on.”</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Parent-provided supplies</td>
<td>Parent-teacher partnership</td>
<td>“I would ask parents to, to, to provide, to provide a white board marker for them to write over it”; “At the beginning of the year we have play dough because parents bring play dough in their list”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Exercise book, worksheet</td>
<td>Academic learning</td>
<td>“I would keep them busy with maybe something in their exercise book, extra worksheets, um, or sometimes we play ah bingo game, em, or different other things, together.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bingo game</td>
<td>Play=learning</td>
<td>“I developed this game, I call it the number bingo game. And it’s simple, I just did a line here on the paper and three columns. And I put the number and the name, like “Two, zero” And when I call the- and I would give them a circle for them to place when the number is called.”</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>National anthem/pledge specific</td>
<td>Cultural/Belize specific</td>
<td>“We emphasize them as to how to stand for the national anthem and to say the pledge”</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Prayers, Religious songs</td>
<td>Religion in school/Cultural/Belize specific</td>
<td>“We just sing a little prayer – nothing with no religion. Just a prayer for them to, to understand or to learn, I should use that word that there is somebody who we need to give thanks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Identifying family members</td>
<td>Home/School connections</td>
<td>“Who are the members of their family? The names of their parents because sometimes they don’t know their parents’ name”</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Letter identification/Letter sounds</td>
<td>Academic learning</td>
<td>“If it’s a, ahm, if it’s a letter that I would be working with, em, we will identify the letter ‘F,’ the capital and lower case ‘F’. The sound of the letter ‘F’. What we can write with ‘F’. Like, ‘fish,’ ‘frog,’ ‘flower,’ all of those. Um, we would sing songs, and (?) how the ‘F’ says, ‘fff.’”</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Storyreading/discussion</td>
<td>Academic learning</td>
<td>“I would read them a story, like the “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” Different stories…so, um. And then, after the story we will do like a little discussion. Like, I will ask them, did Goldilocks found three or four plates, so, you know? Little questions to see if they were, paying attention or they got the plot.”</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Two Different curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum from ministry</td>
<td>“Because would be in one level first and then they would be here and then they, they start here, um, like from in-between because, em, it’s a</td>
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different curriculum. One curriculum is for level one the other is for level two.”

| 15 | Teaching through play | Play=learning | “If we are working on ‘myself,’” maybe we would sing songs that include like, the five senses, and, brushing teeth, if you’re working on hygiene, brushing teeth, washing hands, um, different songs or fingerplays or poems we would do at circle time. “They love cutting and doing arts, um, painting. Especially when they have to mix one color with the next one. (laughs) They like that. Yes, that’s how I taught them the colors. So, from then, that day, every time when we paint, “I want the other color, too. So I can mix it and see what color it’s going to be!” “Sometimes we will do a circle, or, depends if they’re working on a letter we would…line letter, flash cards with letters and then they would run and they will get a letter. And they would say the name of the letter.”

Teacher uses play activities to teach lessons
| 16 | Personalized instruction | Differentiated instruction/tutoring | “While they are doing the work I will tell him, one-to-one, you know. Can you tell me which letter is this? And then, it will be more like one to one.”  
“So I think it’s very important for us as a parent ‘cause that’s why Teacher tutors struggling students in afternoon session |
| 17 | Ask parents to send struggling children in afternoon | Parent/Teacher partnership | “We would also ask the parents that like, you know, um, this is what we are working so, um, since your child is only one year, if you can, to send him or her to the afternoon, too. So that it can, em, help him to enhance the other skills that happen in level one”  
Teacher communicates student need for more instruction with parents |
| 18 | Adapting curriculum provided to Belize | Cultural/Belize specific | “It tells everything that you should be covering. And me, well, me sometimes I add other things, that, as to Belize”  
Teacher needs to adapt curriculum at times to make learning specific to Belize culture |
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<th>19</th>
<th>Parent conflict</th>
<th>Parent/Teacher partnership</th>
<th>“Because, sometimes, the parents, em, they would bring their child only one year. And their child come from zero, zero nothing because maybe they might not, they are children that they don’t like to watch TV, programs. And then on top of that the parents they leave to work when their child is asleep and they come back when their child is sleeping already. So sometimes they don’t put their input. And, then the babysitter either, and then they wa-they want you as a teacher to, to do it! And like if, you, when, when it’s not working to the speed that they want, it’s like, “You’re not a good teacher! For what we’re paying so much?” or you know? Some parents goes like that. Because, here they’re paying a lot…”</th>
<th>Teacher expresses moments of conflict with parents</th>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Parents Participation</td>
<td>Parent/Teacher partnership</td>
<td>“Yes, I have, em, we, eh, in the preschool, we have the, the, month of March. That’s the stimulation month, we call it. That’s when different, em, activities go around. Like, Parent Day, um, Grandparents visit, visit to the dentist, we have the, um, the dentist come in to school. And we would ask parents, you know, we would like if you can help us with, a, balloons. Um, shilling water for us to take.”</td>
<td>Parents actively participate in the activities for preschool</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Children enjoys arts &amp; crafts most</td>
<td>Play=learning</td>
<td>“They like painting, they like cutting. When we work with cutting with scissors. Ah, they like cutting with scissors. Um, when we use different art materials to do maybe a collage of something. They enjoy that. They enjoy doing arts.”</td>
<td>Children appear to most enjoy hands-on, play based, creative activities</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Limited resources</td>
<td>High cost of materials/Barriers to play</td>
<td>“Because I believe that if we would had the resources, more, well I said, I wish we have the resources. But, then financial or the money, to go buy that game, for us to play it. How much games we could buy, you know. Here in Belize it’s a bit expensive. So, um, for us to, to buy so that we can play this game today, maybe tomorrow another game. Rather than we have to create it, if we don’t if we don’t have the financial, money to go buy it”</td>
<td>Teacher laments the high cost of materials; desires more supplies</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Hands-on activities</td>
<td>Play=learning</td>
<td>“They like painting, they like cutting. When we work with cutting with scissors. Ah, they like cutting with scissors. Um, when we use different art materials to do maybe a collage of something. They enjoy that. They enjoy doing arts.”</td>
<td>Children enjoy learning through arts &amp; crafts</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Observing other classrooms</td>
<td>Teacher expresses desire to visit other classrooms for ideas and training</td>
<td>&quot;Well, this year, I, I, em, what the University wants to do is to, to do like a Montessori. But, em, I want to get my trays. ‘Cause I went to a Montessori school and I saw most of the things are on trays. Like puzzles, they're on little trays and the children will get the trays. They go to the table they do it or they go on the mat and they do it. Then the put it up again and they put up the tray. Like it’s more organized. And I want to, um, do like more different games, that I have in mind. For this new year. After I went to visit that school, I, I got a lot of different ideas. And the thing is that, um, well I don’t know about you guys up there but here it’s like more difficult. Because we are in the school all day. And the only free day that we have is like during the weekend. And then weekend schools are not open so that you can go check their school and get ideas and see how they do that poster or the other things&quot;</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>“Well, yes. The always tell us that children learn through play. So, um, they teach us different songs, poems, they teach us, um, sometimes different games that we can use in this classroom. Um, different little, em, hands-on things that we can do for them to use to play. And to help us to assess them. Like, um, sometimes we have workshop as to different things that we use at home that sometimes we throw them away and we can use them to take them to school to, to build this and do that or use it for this and there”</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Difficult behaviors</td>
<td>Behavioral management</td>
<td>And then this year I have some of them where, (exclaims) their behavior! Ah, like, the one who was sitting there. Oh my.Sometimes I would, ooh, get exhausted by midday I</td>
<td>Teacher explains content of workshops and training attended to learn how to teaching through play</td>
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was exhausted with him already. So, like, whatever you tell him, it doesn’t work. So, his grandmother live right there, so she tells me, “when he doesn’t want to listen you tell him I’m right there by the window.”

<p>| 27 | Time outs | Disciplinary measures | “The only punishment that we do here and I don’t recall I do it this year with them. Like, we just put a chair there. And, ‘oh you will go in time out chair.’” | Milder disciplinary measures taken in preschool; corporal punishment out ruled |</p>
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<th>Play scheduled in curriculum</th>
<th>Opportunities for play</th>
<th>Scheduled play time makes greater opportunities for play in preschool</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Well, when they come, they play. Like from 8:00-8:30 they just hang around and play. They hang around and play. So, um, 8:30-9:00 I would give them a little activity. It could be, an activity where they need to sit down and trace something, write, or color or paint or cut. Like an activity…or it could be a game that we would play together as a class. Or it could be like a puzzle. Like I give to this table, give to that table and, and then they would, together they would put it…together. Or, um, we would go outside to walk on the tires, or go by basketball court there so they could run. Um, and then after that we will go for circle time. And then, um, it all depends what I would do for, oh, I missed that part to the physical play. Sometimes, I would, em, just do like a, that, mo-, that would be a classroom together, not, like by themselves. That would be games.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Using songs/games to teach concepts</td>
<td>Play=learning</td>
<td>“Right here focused on the, ‘Ok, that’s the letter ‘A’!’ and only if we do it into different games. Like, I have a book that I have not read all of it but then a, I just get it from a parent. And this book have, um, different things for each letter. Like for the letter ‘A,’ ‘A, A for ants.’ The ants are walking and you ‘A, ahhh.’ So, and different for each letter it has one so. I, I do one at a time. So we can do it together.</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Teacher plays with children</td>
<td>Teacher Roles/Interaction during play</td>
<td>“We do a circle and we would play this game, “Duck, duck, goose.” Where you sit down and they will come, “Duck” and they will touch on your head, “Duck, duck, duck” if they touch you and they tell you, “Goose!” that means that you have to go and catch that child. So I would have to get up (laughs) and try to catch” “ Depends on the game because if you’re playing bingo, well I would be the one who would be say, “Well, if you have the number “2,” but if you’re playing maybe, um, the “Duck, duck, Goose,” they pick, you have to run.”</td>
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<td>Observing children at play</td>
<td>Play-based assessment</td>
<td>Teacher reports observing play as a means of assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>“Sometimes we go and we play hide and seek, and then I would, um, just be there. Maybe, not really taking part and go hiding myself but then I would be there listening to them, for them to count in a sequential order from one to ten, or one to twenty, whichever. And then, um, I would say, “Ready or not, here, um, Brianna comes.” And the other would stay quiet there. And, and like that. And then I would say somebody else’s turn and then I would be doing my assessing there and listening to them count in sequential order.”</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>Teachers are taught how to create play based lessons in training</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Workshops: play in classroom</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>“They always tell us that children learn through play. So, um, they teach us different songs, poems, they teach us, um, sometimes different games that we can use in this classroom. Um, different little, em, hands-on things that we can do for them to use to play. And to help us to assess them” “When we are in the university level when they give us to, to, to do a game. They tell, em, ‘You need to do a game.’ Especially the ones, we were, we study for school, right? ‘You need to do a game”</td>
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<td>Um, the other one I would say, would be different skills like, manipulatives things that they could be able to hold a pencil correctly, um, crayons, um, because some of them they would do it like this, and if you don’t correct them they continue like that. Or even the crayons they will hold it like that. And, and then um, for them to hold it properly and teach them the, the, the proper way to write the letter or the number</td>
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<td>“I always have them write that letter that we cover, and, and I will tell them for the “E”, “Line, up and around.” I tell them, that’s what I tell them, “Line, up, and around.” “A, around and down.” And so, when they don’t know how to do it, I would always put two dots and I would tell them, “Line, up and around.” ‘A’ I would do it like this “Around and down.” Like the “F” sometimes they would do like that, so but I tell them, “You start here, down and then across.” And different, little, ah, things, like that. But, I, to me like everything! Because preschool is the foundation! So, like everything is important. For them to be ready.”</td>
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<td>“Because when you go to Infant I, it’s, it’s more children than in preschool. Maybe in Infant I it will be like thirty-five, forty children. And sometimes the teacher, um, she would, sometimes she will leave it like that.”</td>
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INTERVIEW #1: Mr. Roberto Cortes, Head Preschool teacher
Semilla Protestant School (Rural Site)
6/16/2015, 1:32pm

KPM: Ok, Mr. Roberto*, um, I just want to make sure it’s recording…Thank you so much, I really appreciated, uh, the time that I’ve spent in your classroom observing and so, now it’s time for the sit down interview part. So I just wanted to thank you for the opportunity to come in and observe your classroom, you’ve been very helpful, to me. So now I’ve prepared some questions to ask you. Mostly about your teaching, what you think about, um, children as they’re growing and developing and what you hope to accomplish as you’re sending them off to Infant I…Mostly it’s about how you’re preparing them, and we call that “school readiness in the U.S.”

RC: Okay…

KPM: So, I’ll ask you specific questions about that, and I also have another…line of questioning that has to do with what you think about children when they’re playing…and how that ties into learning. OK. So…um. I know your time is valuable, so (laughs) I’m going to get started right away. My first question I have for you is, um, I would like you to explain, um, to walk me through a normal day in your classroom. What does that look like? And what, how do you prepare for it and, um, what are some of the goals you like to achieve…on a typical day?

RC: Okay…Well, em, like I’ve mentioned before, we have to, we have a curriculum and we need to follow that curriculum. We divide the curriculum in ten different topics. Uh, the last topic for this month was the, climate and weather. So…we were focusing on the weather, different types of weather during this day, and what types of clothing do they use. We also focus each month on a number and on a letter. So at the beginning of the day, they’re going to come in class and they’re going to have the self-chosen activity where they’re going to be playing…in different areas of the, in the class. Em…there is…emm, there are some corners, for examples, books, they, they need to have books weather, whe-where it would show, like, days of, em, sunny days, windy day, rainy day. Toys that they’re going to be playing. For examples, em, some umbrellas, some rubber boots, or any type of clothing that they need to use, during the different types of weather. They’re going to color. If they choose to go in the, play where they’re going to color they need to color ss-su-a sun, or a cloud. Or also, em, matchings, pictures of the sun, and the numbers also. Number ten, the last one, ehh, we’ll have that number somewhere in the area to play. After that, um, from the self-chosen activity we continue with the circle time. In the circle time we are going to get together, they’re going to, we’re going to talk about the calendar. Em, attendance will be called. Eh, we are going to sing, a bible story is going to be given to them. And then, em, mm, if they have something to tell you they’ll tell you, they’ll tell you on that time.

KPM: During circle…ok..

RC: Mmhmm. Sometimes you call it, em, “News Time.” And they will inform you about something going on with them and their family or something that they did during the day or during the weekend. After that we have the lesson. The lesson is the one that we focus mostly. So, if we are going to teach about the numbers, we need to do something with the number ten. We need to sing, a song with the number ten we need to do different activities using the number ten: counting, em, trying to form the number in the air, then trace it, then, em, eventually they are going to learn to write it free-handedly. And, try to involve an activity that they are going to be moving around. For example, “Bring me ten cups.” They are going to bring it. “Bring me ten exercise books.” They
are going to bring it. “Find me…” And you use all the numbers, not only the number ten, but you reach up to ten. You review all the others numbers that you have taught already. After that we have the snack, and that’s where they, they sit and eat their snack. It should be a healthy snack! (laughing) But some parents give their child a sweet or biscuit.*

KM: (laughing) *When you say it’s supposed to be healthy is that like, the recommendation-
RC: Yeah.
KPM: ...from...coming from the Ministry?
RC: Yeah.
KPM: OK..
RC: (enthusiastically) No sweets should be allowed! (Unintelligible)
KPM: (laughs)
RC: No sweet, no biscuit, no chips.
KPM: Hmm!
RC: Basically, and they don’t want a lot. For example, if you have seen some of the parents they get for their child, em, four tacos, five tacos-
KPM: Yeah!
RC: And that’s basically a meal.
KPM: Yeah...For a little kid, yeah.
RC: Uh-huh, so, so what they want is just a snack, I tell them just get one orange, one banana, bring a yogurt, and that’s it. That is their snack. But parents, they, they still bring, em, and things. And sometimes the child see other, with, ah, with a chips and they want the chips and parents-
KPM: (knowingly) Oh yeah…
RC: Go and get them a chips. So,
KPM: Hmm!
RC: Even though we tell them not to do it they…still do it. (chuckles)
KPM: Yeah. (chuckles)
RC: (laughing) So after the snack time, then there is the lesson oriented activity, where they’re going to work. We are going to color, a number ten or they’re going to count around an umbrella or something that will help them to remember the lesson.
KPM: Mmhm.
RC: Something that will remember, their lesson. And after they finish with that we do the group time. That group time is the story time. We try to invo...em, involve a story that will link with the, with the lesson. So if you’re going to be talking about colors, you teach – you find a s – story, ah, a story about colors. For example, “Who color the, the, em, Porcupine Purple?”
KPM: Mmhm...
RC: Or, there’s one, when I teach red, blue and white. The wise?...the, em, paint, paint, mouse paint? I think.
KPM: Mmhm.
RC: Three little mouse, mices that get, em, in different colors of paint, and they mix it while playing in the, in the puddle of paint. So that is one story that I use. So I try to, to link it, em, when we are talking about. Another one, like for the number three, I tell the story about the, the three bears…
KPM: Yeah…
RC: Three little bears…
KPM: Three little pigs…
RC: Or the three little pigs. Related to, to our lesson. That is the group time. We also do some rhymes and jingles. Rhymes and jingle. “Itsy, bitsy, spider”, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star”... and others that you can, think that you can use on that, on that day that you are teaching that lesson. And... this will lead us to... to the dismissal. Then, that is over with, all from all the activity during the morning. So, that is a basically one day... one morning that they will be here in school.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: Mhmm.

KPM: So... how many students do you have?

RC: Well, I have thirty students in the morning, and fifteen in the afternoon. The morning students are four to five years old, and the afternoon three to four.

KPM: Ok... well it sounds like... your... typical school day is very well planned and very well organized... and you plan many varied activities that are... centered around your theme. Um, it sounds like you choose books in the centers that are related to your theme, so when you said it was, um, the weather, you choose materials, and um-

RC: Mhmmm.

KPM: Dress up clothes-

RC: Mhmmm.

KPM: That are tied into the theme. So it can reinforce their learning, right?

RC: Yes.

KPM: Um. I was wondering about the weather... um. And this is a cultural question. When you cover a topic do find sometimes that you have to make it specific to Belize? Or do you teach them about... everything?

RC: Mmm. Well we try to focus only on Belize.

KPM: Uh-huh.

RC: For example, when we are talking about the weather I don’t mention, em –

RC & KPM: (simultaneously) Snow! (laughter)

RC: It’s uh, we don’t mention, “It’s a snowy day!” No.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: Because we are-

KPM: They would never see snow!

RC: Not going to experience. Even though some chi-children, they see it on TV, they talk about it at home. Ah, they see pictures about it. But we don’t focus on that. We only focus here, uh, things about Belize. And also when we are teaching about, em, transportation we have to tell them, we- I mention them about a train, but here in Belize there’s no train-

KPM: That’s true!

RC: So, ah, the air balloon- we have not- never seen an air balloon here. But I show them pictures, but we mostly focus on what we have, specifically in our village.

KPM: Mhmm. Specifically, in your village, you mean. Hmm..

RC: Ah-hah. Like for example, a bus, the bicycle, motorcycle those are some types of land transportation.

KPM: Mhmm. Do you find that if you keep it, specific to what the children are used to seeing that you get more participation, they’re able to raise their hand and say, “Yes, I’ve seen that.”?

RC: Yes. They part-they wi-they will participate, they will tell you because they have seen it already, so. They are going to find a-they, a connection between what I am telling and what they have, what they have seen. Also, we, there is another topic about, em, animals. Wild animals.
KPM: Yeah.
RC: Yes, they know that an elephant is a wild animal, but we have never, we don’t have, an ele-
phant here in Belize. We have a tapir-
KPM: Right…
RC: We have a toucan, we have monkeys-
KPM: But nothing that big!
RC: Hmm..(chuckles)
KPM: (laughs) OK!...That’s really awesome, I’m, I-I’ve….seen your class in action, and hearing
about it- it just really did a good job walking me through what an average class looks like. So....how
do you feel, especially since it’s the end of the year, how do you feel about the progress your class
has made since the beginning?
RC: Well…I- I have seen a lot of progress, in children. When they first start preschool in
September, some of them…they were just crying at the beginning…they (laughing) didn’t want to
stay in school…
KPM: Even the older ones?
RC: Even the older ones.
KPM: Uh-huh.
RC: Some of them, even though if you tell them what to do they would not, do it. Uh, but right
now I can only give them a paper and they know what they need to do. If they see dots, they already
know that they are going to trace on that paper. See- if they see their name they know that they
need to copy-
KPM: Mmhmm.
RC: …their name. So I think they are, they have done a lot of progress in school. I like to see their
coloring pages at the beginning of the year they only scratch, they only scribble. But at the end
you can see how they…really take care of that crayon and try to fill in the pictures inside and try
to use different colors…and, uh. Their, their col-when we teach about colors- at the beginning it’s
kind of difficult. Some of them they come with a background, ah, from home- parents teach them.
KPM: Mmhmm.
RC: But others they-they just come blank to preschool. And when they leave you, and, they can
say their colors, they can say some of their letters, they can recognize their numbers. So, there is a
lot of progress…that they do in preschool.
KPM: So you, that must feel really proud when you see that.
RC: Yeah. (laughs)
KPM: Yeah! (laughs) Ummm…Now this is a question about parents. Because you mentioned you
notice that there are some, that, have even done something to prepare them for even coming into
preschool and some that this is their first school experience. Um, and you can tell me a little bit
about…parent participation. So this question is about that. How do you feel, um, about the
participation level of the parents of your preschoolers? Are you satisfied with their participation
level?
RC: Yes. I can say that parents participate a lot. Not only this year. I have seen it throughout the
years that I have been teaching that well it is in preschool, parents are always there asking what is
going to happen, what will come next. And they’re here for their child, they participate in the
different activities and their willing to, to help in any, in any way possible. So I think that
parents…they play an important role in preschool.
KPM: Yeah.
RC: And sometimes, I, tell them. This is not the only place where you need to be with your child. You need to have, well, you need to go, when he goes to primary school you need to be there with him also. When he moves to high school, not because he is so big, you’re not going to be around him, helping him. You should be there throughout all his or her education. So, right here in preschool parents, really cooperate. They cooperate and they help. They help.

KPM: I wonder if, um, parents feel like it necessary to ask for advice about something. Or do they ever come to you with questions? As the child’s teacher?

RC: Yes. Ye-I think that parents, they, not, not all of them. Some of them will come and will tell you, “Teacher, in what can I help my child at home, what can I do-“

KPM: Wow.

RC: Em, “For this holidays, what are we going to do for vacation?” And I will, eh, tell them what to do, tell them to…read them a book-

KPM: Aww.

RC: Or be with them, recalling their colors. Or anytime they have free to just sit with them and tell them to count with them or something like that. Some parents, they, yes. But others, not, not, not so much. But, but I think that most of them do something at home that helps, help the child. Especially for the children that are a little bit behind.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: Well parents, they see the progress between the others and their child and then they don’t want their child to be left behind, they want them to be, em, at the same level. So they will try to do something. So they will come and ask for help.

KPM: Hm. That’s very nice. So it’s, um, it’s evident to you that it’s important for the parents to have a relationship with the teacher and have an involvement, to have the school year go...smoothly?

RC: Yes. That’s definitely. Because, mm, because I, well I believe and I think that every teacher believe this that…a child not only depends on, on a teacher it depends on the parent, on the teacher and on himself also. Because if he puts himself to that he wants to accomplish something he will do it. But he will need the help of the parent and the help of the teacher. So..

KPM: Right…yes.

RC: Everyone must work hand to hand.

KPM: And work together for the same goal. Yes.

RC: Yea.

KPM: So. Tell me about some of the activities and lessons that you do that your students love the most. What do the really enjoy, when you pull that out?

RC: Mmm. One of the things that they like, emm. I try to make my lessons fun, and exciting for them. I don’t want them to be, to feel bored in preschool. I don’t want, em, for their first experience, for their for fir-

KPM: I can pause...

RC: (aside) Right now...Ok, I don’t want their first experience in education to be bored. Or for them to have that belief in them that school is not good. So I try to do something that will help, that they will like, and that they will want to be here in preschool! And there are some children that when parents come and get them they don’t want to go home (chuckles) they want stay here!

KPM: (laughs)

RC: And they want, they cry! And it’s because I think I try to involve a lot of things. I don’t, I bring puppets to school. They just love the puppets when the puppets are talking to them. Emm, they pay more attention maybe to the (laughing) puppets…and they like it. They like to, to play
the surprise box when something, when you put different things in a box and you make them guess, they like that. They’ll also like to sing and have a lot of movement. When they are moving…they will be with you.

KPM: Mmhmm.

RC: Yes. Those are some activities, that they, anything that they like, they enjoy doing. As well, and there are times that we go around the school compound. They like to be outside, observing and seeing different, eh, activity that is going around the school. So, so they like.

KPM: So even though they’re preschoolers you try to also have them feel connected to the rest of the school?

RC: Yes. We, at first, the first, like for example the first week in school we are going to be, eh, walking around school. We are going to go to the different classes. I am going to show them that they are not the only ones here in, in preschool. That we have other students in primary school. And some of them they have their brothers and sisters, and, and I take them to, so that they can see them. And they don’t feel that they are alone here in, in this compound. They have someone else here. We also participate in, em, sports day. When primary school has their sports day we have, we go with them to the sports day. And…they count the, em, when we have open day we also participate with them. Christmas program…they are fir- the preschool is the first one that’s going to present then, others will follow. So we try to get involved in as much as possible in the activities of the school also.

KPM: Very nice! All right…How much time…do your students spend playing during the school day?

RC: Well…it’s supposed to be like for the self-chosen activity they should be playing – that is thirty minutes. And, eh, we have also, ehh, fifteen minutes, after the lesson – I skipped that one, see? We have the physical play, outdoor/indoor-

KPM: Right.

RC: So that is after the, the, we teach the lesson. Eh, that is fifteen minutes. That will be thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five minutes they will be playing…that we should be, we, should be playing.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: But I think that we play…more than that. Because during the, the lessons…we’re not going to be just sitting. They’re going to be doing some, some activity that might be considered playing-

KPM: Uh-huh!

RC: But they are learning. But they are learning and I am teaching. For eh-we, we can, we, for eh, they are playing, with ah-we ca-I can bring a puzzle for them. They can be fixing that puzzle they are playing, but they are learning something. When they’re finished that puzzle they’re going to see something that we are going to be talking about, on that, about, on that day. Em, also the ABC, we can bring a puzzle, biig puzzle, each one get a piece of the puzzle and everyone become, [they are playing at that time!], they’re playing but we are learning our ABC and putting the ABC together. So I think that they, they play more than…forty-five minutes in school.

KPM: How do you notice that they play together?

RC: You…you see them. When they get in groups. They…each child will have a group. Each child will have their friends.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: Mmhmm. So as they come in they are going to be looking of that for that friend and they’re going to on that corner. And you can see they – one will be, like, like the, the teacher that will be giving the orders to the others – “see we’re going to do this, you will bring me this, you are going...”
and they are going to be playing together like that. Whe-even the games that I teach, em, that I use, they use it when they’re, when they’re playing in the self-chosen activity.

KPM: Uh-huh.

RC: Only this morning – I, I saw them, they were a group, they were, there was a group of them…like for- three boys and two girls…and they were playing the “Veo, Veo”* one?

KPM: Yes! (laughs)

RC: “Veo, veo!” And he was asking for something…que le da risa…he say, something that will make him laugh…

KPM: How cute!

RC: (laughing) And I was watching them because I, I wanted to know, what was that that we-will make him laugh?!

KPM: So you watched…to see…

RC: Ah-hah!...and one of them went and he brought a bunny…the, the stuffed toy, the bunny rabbit…

KPM: Yeah.

RC: “Nooo,” he said that doesn’t make me laugh. The other one went and brought a piece of puzzle, “Noo.” Then they went and they find the, the, the, Mr. Potato, and Mr. Potato has different the parts, all over the, all over the potato. And when they brought him? Ah, “Yes, this one’s making (laughing) me laugh.”

KPM: (laughing)

RC: (still laughing) So…I was watching at them and they’re playing. They’re, they like to play together. They like to play together. They like-

KPM: Do you feel that when you observe things like that happen that you’re actually watching them as they’re learning? 

RC: Yes…

KPM: And…when you’re observing do you see that they show you, through play, what they’re learning? Do you find that happen?

RC: Definitely. Definitely.

KPM: OK.

RC: Definitely. Because, they are going – some of them, they think that they they will act as the teacher. And they will be telling you, “Ehh, tell me what is this color?” and the others are telling them – that color is blue, that color is red. And you can see that, the- you can see that they are learning their colors. Or “Bring me…em, bring me two books!,” one will say the other will go get and will bring the two books.

KPM: Wow…

RC: You can see that they are learning they’re numbers also from there.

KPM: Yeah.

RC: So I think that they are – Or! If you put, your, your, your, charts on the wall your, your charts on your walls there will be a point that they will go on that chart and they will say, they will be saying by themselves

KPM: Ohhhh…

RC: They are going to be saying it or will ask others to tell them, “What is this?” “What is this?” And the other will be telling. So they are, they learn, they learn a lot.

KPM: I have a question about your structure here. So you, teach the lesson and then you want to take them out and do outside? Or…

RC: Yes.
KPM: Play, some kind of playing. And then you bring back later to do a lesson. Can you tell me why you broke it that way?
RC: Well...it was, it is given to us like that. Ministry is...give it to us. There was a point that we were, teachers, preschool teachers were asking if we could change the different hours of our schedule. But they said no, that we cannot change it. Because, it is very hard to follow that schedule in the afternoon session.
KPM: OK.
RC: Because the afternoon session they are more babies and they want to play...more!
KPM: Ohhhh...
RC: They want to play more. And their attention span is also different.
KPM: Correct.
RC: In the morning they can pay attention to you more than those, that, em, more than the little ones that come in the afternoon. The afternoon if you have them ten minutes, em, they’re looking at you, that will be it. And the rest they will like to be playing, so you have to be, em, to get activities that will help them evolve while you are teaching them.
KPM: Yes.
RC: And eh, in the afternoon I would prefer to do (laughing) everything, and lastly I will leave the, the em, the play, playtime (laughing) and the snack time. But we cannot change it, it was given to us by Ministry like, like that. Snack, clean up, is, and they will do a
KPM: And then another...learning, yeah.
RC: Yes..in the morning children-children are more, em, are less hype-
KPM: Yes.
RC: Than when they give the-when you give their snack, they get more hyper.
KPM: More hyper! Yeah.
RC: So, it’s hard for them to concentrate.
KPM: So....it sounds like you already incorporate a lot of playful activities when you’re doing a lesson. So that’s a time when you’re definitely interacting with is when you’re teaching them a lesson?
RC: Mmhmm.
KPM: But do you find that when they’re doing their free time do they ask you to join them? Or do you ever find that you’re interacting with them during this time? When they’re playing just, like, free?
RC: Ummm. Hm. I don’t, I don’t, I don’t think so.
KPM: No?
RC: No. Mmhmm. I would be just...observing them. Mm.
KPM: Observing? Yeah.
RC: Observing them. Maybe I think them a little while and telling them what to do. Or if I see them struggling with a puzzle, or, or em, beading something? Well, I will show them but that will be it. They uh, they play more with their friends.
KPM: With their friends...
RC: The only time that we’re going to play is when, for the physical, for the physical play. When we go outside or we stay inside.
KPM: And you’re leading them in a game?
RC: Uh-huh. In a game. And I’m telling them what to do. Then I will be with there. But in the self chosen activity they are going to do it by themselves.
KPM: I have a little bit of a question, um...about that. I wonder if, are children taught that your teacher is your teacher? And you can’t really see them as somebody to bring into your games? I-I don’t know...
RC: Maybe.
KPM: Is that cultural here?
RC: Maybe, maybe, maybe that is what the children...think. They see this is the teacher, he will not be here involving with us. He will be just watching us. Maybe that is how, how they feel. But in reality, here in Belize, I don’t think that this, that is something that it is, em, like how we call, how can we say, prohibited?
KPM: Uh-huh.
RC: For us to join them.
KPM: OK.
RC: Some of some of them if they get really attached to you, then, they will come, they will hug you, they will be around you.
KPM: Yes! (chuckles) I know!
RC: (laughs) Show you things...(laughs)
KPM: Yes, I know...um. Ha-so. Have you ever, this is a hard- Have you ever observed a child that had a hard time learning how to play, like he stood off in the side and didn’t know what to do and you had to somehow invite him to join another child?
RC: Yes. They, this happen. I have seen it happen when they are the only child in the family.
KPM: Ahhh.
RC: When, then, they just. And sometimes, they do it because they are selfish. They just want the toys for themselves.
KPM: I see...
RC: They don’t want to play with others. And that is a po-a, em, strong point that we try to do here in preschool. For them to socialize with each other. We tr-ta- we try to teach them how to do this. And yes, I am going to get close to him and I will tell him, “Go and play with him, he will share with you, don’t be by yourself. Try to be with others.” And eventually they’re going to start to play with...one friend, two friends, then they’re going to be start to playing with other friends here in, in the preschool.
KPM: Maybe did you notice like it took maybe some getting used to the preschool environment and then they learned the routine and then they were able to just come in and star- ‘cause I noticed they come right in they start playing ‘cause they already know what to do!
RC: Ah-hah, yes. But at the beginning, it is not like that.
KPM: Uh-huh.
RC: Some of them will want their chair and sit right there on that chair and not move until everything is finished. But we try to encourage them to go and play with the different toys in class and with their friends also.
KPM: Ok, this reminded me of one family question. Do you find it important to find out about family structure of the children coming in? Just so it can a little bit help you to figure them out when they’re in the class and what you’re seeing them do?
RC: When they are going to register in preschool we give them a form. We give them a form. But that is not so much in detail. Just like for example, the job of the mother, the job of the dad. How many, em, members are in their family. If he has a sickness or something like that. And the, the thing here is that the village is small.
KPM: Yes!
RC: And we know each other-(laughs)
KPM: OK! (laughs)
RC: And we know things that happen and we know their background. I, well I, know the background of the different children. And it affects them a lot. And it affect- there are different problems that families encounter that when they- the child comes to school, you can see how it affects them.
KPM: True.
RC: And that is the way how…you need to prepare and to handle them. You need to find ways to handle them. There was a case…that the little boy, his mom left him…his mom left. And they, he was taken care by his grandmother. And when we talk about family…when we talk about family. Then I said…em, this is your mommy, this is your daddy. And we are going to make the card for your mommy…and then he will say, “I don’t have a mommy, teacher…”
KPM: Awww…
RC: Uh-huh, and then I have to say, “OK.” Then I have to remember that and try to do other, things, for exam-, well, well, then other times I will say, “Well, we’re going to give this to your grandma, to your mommy or to your daddy,” try to involve other, other members not only focus on the mother because you know that this is going to affect the little child. So, being in a village I think that is good because we, we know the background of the different parents-
KPM: Mmhmm…and it does help when you’re trying to plan things like that, um, to know…so that you can help the child through it. So that’s another thing- when they’re in preschool, there’s a strong emphasis on not just the academics, you want them to learn colors and shapes, but there’s the social and emotional development-
RC: Yes…
KPM: So how do you feel like you prepare them in that way?
RC: I think it goes, it goes hand in hand with our daily, our daily time here in school. You can, because you, you will see the child, you will see the, he behaves or she behaves. And you will try to, to mend their behavior. If their…or if they’re feeling afraid you need to find why they’re feeling are afraid. And you need to tell their parents. If their parents are doing something wrong at home, you need to tell them. Because you, here in pres- I think that, that children, eh, there, you can see the different attitude that the child comes to school. A child should be happy, I think that they should be happy all the time (laughing).
KPM: Yes!
RC: Not worrying about anything! Or just playing. And if you see that there is a problem with your child, you need to tell the parents and the parents will, will, will tell you what is going on and you will encourage the parents and advise them on what to do, not to do things in front of the child that will affect him. So I think that, that, we-this, being a preschool teacher helps them in both the academic and the-and their emotional.
KPM: Yes, definitely. You can see that play out whenever you see them struggling with a particular area like, sharing. And then, as they get used to the preschool environment where everybody has to share everything, everybody sits next to each other and has snack, it just…starts to…develop, over the whole school year.
RC: Mmhmm.
KPM: Just by the way the, um, schedule is structured that way. Develops a lot of interaction.
RC: Mmhmm.
KPM: Now, I asked you a little bit- I know you’re training, so I’m, um, curious, how much...do they have an emphasis on play, as part of your training with young children?
RC: Well….I have finished my certificate on primary education. I’m doing a bachelor’s now in primary education. And, uh, if I’m not mistaken…I have not encountered not one course that is, has taught me on how to play with children-
KPM: That is so interesting! I teach an entire course on play over in the U.S. because its part of the curriculum, but, actually it’s not actually early childhood education, their degree plan, it’s primary, it’s like, Pre-K to fourth grade, they get trained in. So, it’s just interesting. I ask because I don’t know. Like, what does the training look like?
RC: No? We just have like the pedagogies, the pedagogy, em, courses?
KPM: Yeah.
RC: Like…em, and, and different subjects. How to teach the different subjects in school…we talk about philosophies, we talk about, em, philosophers.
KPM: Right.
RC: But, never (laughs) I have never encountered-
KPM: That’s interesting!
RC: A course. The only thing they have focused a lot, em, to be child-centered.
KPM: OK.
RC: To be child-centered. To involve the child as much as possible in your, in your activities. To make them be the ones learning by themself and you guiding them…to their learning. But for playing? No…
KPM: (laughs) To you, it sounds bizarre almost?
RC: Yes….
KPM: Yeah? OK! (laughs) It’s so interesting to me.
RC: Maybe that’s WE need here! (laughs)
KPM: OK, maybe, I don’t know!
RC: In our country…
KPM: I’m here to find out!
RC: Because I have seen some teachers and I have, they don’t like to be around (laughing) child…
KPM: That’s what I mean, whenever I’m with the students I make an emphasis on, “You have to know what it means to be like a child.” So I teach them to be playful-
RC: Yes!
KPM: To tap into that side of themselves…because you’re going to around little kids all day, you have to be playful!
RC: Yes, you have to be!
KPM: …and I have to say, you have a lot of that! Which is why I think you’re doing such a good job in the preschool- it’s not for everybody.
RC: Yes, I try to do my best when I’m with them.
KPM: Yeah, I mean, you’re supposed to be warm, and friendly and everything but like, you should make it exciting, like…You’ve seen children’s preschool shows, they’re never, like, (boring voice) saying it really boring, it’s always like some crazy, you know, voices and things to make it…fun. All right, thank you for that, it’s interesting!
(Both laughing)
Now, how, I think this ties into something you were talking about before- I asked you how often you feel like you interact with them and mostly you said that you lead them in like sometimes outdoor play, inside here during the lessons, um, do you feel confident in directing or joining the children when they’re doing that kind of play?
RC: Mm..yes. Yes. Ye-I have been here in preschool for a long time now..(laughs). And I think that yes, I feel confident playing with them. And plus, I have a daughter who’s four years old and I need to be playing with her…constantly.

KPM: Yeah…

RC: She has a...I have my, my nephew also, at the same age. And we are constantly playing together. And something that I, maybe this is what helped me a lot to be here in preschool-

KPM: Mmhmm.

RC: Is because, from a very early age, like for, I was like, only ten years old, when they asked me to help them in Sunday schools at church.

KPM: OK!

RC: So from that day on I was helping, assisting another person, being around smaller kids. I think that, all of those times that I pass there in Sunday school helped me to be the teacher that I am today right here. To have that pa-

KPM: So that was like training!

RC: Yes! To have that patience, to know what to do when the childrens are acting in different ways, so…

KPM: Yes, yeah, that’s very interesting. To almost have that much more expertise beyond just what you’re studying. It’s like, lifelong. So, here a little of your philosophy—what do you believe is most important in preparing children, at this point, for when they’re going to go on…to primary school?

RC: Well…I think that they should…they should know how to, to, to be with each other. They should ha-they should learn that…in school, it’s a place where you’re going to learn. Its, it’s a place where you’re going to find friends. It’s a place that you need to, to respect the teacher and to obey the teacher. So these are the things that I, think that we should, we prepare in preschool. Plus, the, the basic things like colors, shapes, numbers, and the letters. Those are- and their names also. There are, when they go to primary school, the first thing that they are going to start all over again will be with their numbers, with their names and with their letters. And if they come to preschool this will be nothing new for them. They will already have that background on that. This will be, they will not find it so difficult when they go there, because they will already know something. Even though, if they don’t learn how to write it, they will recognize that, that is a number and that is a shape. So when go there, this is what I try to teach them here in preschool. When they move on to primary, they are going to be learning almost the same thing, but, they will have a background. They will not find it difficult. And, because there are some children that, they don’t go to preschool. And when they move on to Infant I, you will see them having a hard time trying to hold their pencil, trying to hold their crayon, their scissors. When that should have happened here in preschool.

KPM: So you see it as already a benefit, almost as a “leg up” when they get there?

RC: Yes, definitely.

KPM: Yeah. You mentioned that your curriculum asks you to teach only a few things, but you found that your class was surpassing that so you decided to make some changes and add some things.

RC: Yes.

KPM: Do you feel like…do you feel like it’s important to move children along if they have already mastered something? Because, for example, I noticed that you were having them read some words already? That’s impressive!

RC: Yes…
KPM: Not for so-not for, not for everybody, kids are at different levels. For some kids, um, they’re parents brag, “Oh, they already know how to read little tiny books.” So what’s a few words? Other parents, they’re happy if their kids know a few letters.
RC: Ah-hah a few words…
KPM: So, do you find it important to move them along? And not keep them back?
RC: I think that…you, you, you should move them. You should move them along. If you, you saw this, em, some of- not all of them were reading. Some of them, they were reading the words. But I show the, the words to everybody. Because I know that some of them will not read it, but they will recognize that is the letter “S”. They will learn the pattern of how to read from this side, to that side.
KPM: Yes.
RC: So, eve-even that they are not on the same level, they are learning something. And the ones that already master it, I think that you should push them a little, a little, em, farther. For them to, to not to keep back. Cause they are going to be feel, they will feel bored after a little while?
KPM: Yeah.
RC: For showing so many times the word, “Sam, Sam, Sam,” they will bo-bored. So you-we will have to show them, “Sam…sat.” “Sam…is sad.”
KPM: Yes…
RC: And eventually the others that are behind, will begin to recognize the word, “Sam.” And the letters in there. So I think that you should, you should push them. If they know it, push them a little farther.
KPM: And its always normal to have a class of all different levels. So you kind of have to know when certain ones are gonna get too bored-
RC: Mmhmm.
KPM: And when certain ones need a lot of help…how to move between that. So. Do you think that the parents’ expectations of how they’re preparing their matches what you’re expecting of the children?
RC: It should. It should match. The first thing that we do when school open is we have a meeting with the parents.
KPM: Ok.
RC: And we explain them what we are going to be teaching here in preschool. And at the end, what they should accomplish. And some of them, you had time to see the, em, assessment booklets?
KPM: Mmhmm.
RC: And…even though there are some, some boxes that says, em, IM? It’s “In progress.”
KPM: Right.
RC: And some of them will say, “A,” means “acquired”. Some parents will find it, will say, “But my child doesn’t has an ‘A’ here…” I will tell them, “Yes, because he’s, he has not acquired it. But he is in progress, he is learning it little by little. And he will need help from you at home, and me here in school. That we are going to do it.” So at the end, once I think that they are “in progress” I think that is good for me and for the child. Because, they are seeing that there is a progress in them. They are not staying stagnant in one place, but they are moving. So, it should match what parents are expecting from, from what we do. But I always tell them if you don’t put your-if the parents don’t put their part, don’t expect that the teacher will do all the work. Because we need to work…together. Together.
KPM: Right. Very realistic. It’s very important for that to be communicated on their part, too. Well we’re at the final question! (laughs) Um, do you believe play can be a factor in preparing children for primary school, realistically?
RC: Yes. Yes, because that is their nature. Children they just love to play, they just love to be moving around. And right now…living in the, in a, in a…digital era, we can say…
KPM: Yeah.
RC: They’re playing their tablets, they’re playing the different activities there in their tablet. But you can find those, em, “apps” that will help them develop their reading skills, their math skills. And, they will be playing and they will be learning. So playing in definitely a big part in preparing a child when, when moving to primary school. And not only focusing on the digital, em, things that we have here. But, also, you can play together, em, go outside, do outdoor games, do indoor games and they will help them. Teaching, when we teach about body parts there’s the “Hokey Pokey” “You put your right hand in”. They will be telling you, they will be showing you which hand, where is your hand. You put your head in, they will be moving their head-
KPM: It’s the hardest thing to teach right from left, right?
RC: Ah-hah
KPM: So a song like that is so helpful! (laughs)
RC: Put a game and they’re going to be playing. And, em, they will be moving and they will be, be learning. So, they will, play is ver-play is very important. I tell parents, you are going to be see that your children be playing. Because some of them tell, they believe that preschool is a just a place where they go “play, play, play” and I tell them, “Yes! We are going to play! But they will be learning. They will learn something, when on that play they will be doing. So play is important, it’s very important.
KPM: Well I want to really say, thank you again, first of all for, sitting down to talk with me about your class, about preschool, about early childhood and how that looks in Belize. I also want to comment you, for the work that you’re doing…with these children. And you’re gonna send them off to Infant I, and I feel like you can definitely feel confident that so much has been accomplished here.
RC: Yes.
KPM: You’re right on so many levels that it takes structure, it takes routine, it takes discipline, and it takes…repetition. So, when the children are seeing, even if they’re not reading, if they’re seeing it over, and over and they’re recognizing daily, you’re building on skills and I can already see that happening here. So, I think that you should feel very proud. You should give yourself a big pat on the back.
RC: OK.
KPM: It’s not the easiest job! I’m so floored that you can manage a room of like, thirty kids!
RC: (laughs)
KPM: So…at this point, effort-effortlessly, I’m pretty sure it wasn’t always that way, but. I just, yeah, I want to say, I’m really, really…impressed by the time I’ve spent in your classroom. And, it’s actually a really great feeling, coming down to Belize and seeing what’s happening with preschools here…
RC: Ok…
KPM: Obviously this is my first stop, but I give a big huge…A+ to what’s happening here!
RC: Ohh!! (laughs)
KPM: Because, um, again I’ve, I’ve observed U.S. classrooms, and, you’re up to par with what they’re doing there. Because, on so many levels, whether it’s play, whether it’s academics, or
whether its social/emotional development, physical development, everything that we want to see happening, at the early childhood level, you’re covering those things across the board. Children are benefitting…from being in-spending this time…here in your class, so. I commend you for that.

RC: OK, thank you!

KPM: Thank you very much for…the opportunity!

RC: You’re welcome. You’re welcome!
INTERVIEW #2: Ms. Pamela Tuk, Lead Preschool II Teacher
Urban Belize Childhood Center (Urban Site)
6/22/2015 2:35pm

KPM: Ok!, I’m gonna put this down here. So, thank you so much for inviting me into your class to observe. I think that I saw a lot of good things happening and as I mentioned, my study is about school readiness so when I come into preschool, I’m just really looking at what teachers are already doing to prepare children for when they go to primary school. So, those are really what my questions are about. What you’re already doing and then I also have questions about parent involvement and play. How play relates to, um, preparing children for school. The first question I wanted you to do was to tell me – walk me through, like, a typical day in your classroom. What would – what would be involved in…a typical day?

P.T.: A typical day…well. We, um, we have a curriculum that we follow. So we will and out of that curriculum we will do a weekly scale and then we will plan what we will teach for each day. For each day. So what we will do for circle time, first is free play, then after free play, what we will do for circle time so like, like, when do, um, at the beginning of the, of the year, um, I, for circle time we share our names, the children’s names, the name of the school. Um, the sing the song, the one that you heard this morning, we love our UB preschool.

KPM: So cute!

P.T.: We…sing the national anthem. Um, the pledge…and we just sing a little prayer – nothing with no religion. Just a prayer for them to, to understand or to learn, I should use that word that there is somebody who we need to give thanks and sometimes they do it at home so they’re familiar with it, but sometimes they don’t. So, um, they would em, ask why we do that sometimes. So I tell them, um, I explain to them you know Jesus is up there, God is up there and he loves us and we need to give thanks. And we move on to giving thanks for our things, our family, and then we move on to asking him to help to take care of the ones who are sick. Most of the time I tell them to pray for the ones who are sick.

KPM: That’s interesting. I heard that this morning I thought was good.

P.T.: So everyday what they, the daily routine is um, for the circle time, when it’s free play is when they go to the different corners. They get familiar with the different corners every day. We change things in the corners…um. Then, em, they move to, from corner to corner. (Incoherent…background noise.) At the beginning, I help them to familiarize with the different corners. But then after that, em, what I do, like during free play, um, I have them like em I use the plastic…I always forget what’s the name. There is a plastic like where you can put it in your…typing sheet and then you can put it in the folder?

KPM: Oh, yes.

P.T.: Well I write whatever I see that they have difficulty…maybe like let’s say writing their first letter of their names. I would write it there, and then I give, I – if I have, ah, mar-white board marker, I will provide it, or else I would ask parents to, to, to provide, to provide a white board marker for them to write over it. It’s like a little white board-

KPM: Oh, I see.

P.T.: Then we practice whatever, I would like them to practice. Maybe a letter, a number or whatever. I use the whiteboard but then they, they, they, em, with that plastic, I tell you about, I
do it on the paper first, and then I slide it in, and then they just like they trace over it. And they will get, the letter that maybe they have difficulty on. (*Calls a child’s name*), teacher is talking. So am, then maybe like I would, the potential that I see in the child I would keep them busy with maybe something in their exercise book, extra worksheets, um, or sometimes we play ah bingo game, em, or different other things, together. Um, rather than sometimes if they just come in in the class at the beginning or stay there. So, am, probab – then after that we will move to the circle time. And like how I tell you it would follow, if we are working on em, “myself,” maybe we would sing songs that include like, the five senses, and, brushing teeth, if you’re working on hygiene, brushing teeth, washing hands, um, different songs or fingerplays or poems we would do at circle time. Including the nat-daily the national anthem, the pledge, the school song, and that’s daily. Because we, we, emphasize them as to how to stand for the national anthem, and to say the pledge. And then the prayer that’s daily. So, the other ones that would, would be like the songs or poems, and when we are singing about family, we would sing, em, family songs like, “Father Abraham,” “This is Mama” different poems that would work with family, so… um it will vary. And after that we will come in the class, and then we will, em, start to work on. Like, if it’s about the family, maybe I will ask them, maybe I will show them, pictures of family. And then, um, I will tell more or less to compare themselves as to which family they would belong to. Maybe a family of three, a family of four, maybe they have sister, or brothers. You know, depending on the amount. And then, em, I would ask them to bring a picture for them share. And, just little discussion and share their pictures, like that maybe trips that they have made. Um, things that they do together with their family during the weekend. Um, different things like that. Like, taking care of each other. Who are the members of their family? The names of their parents, because sometimes they don’t know their parents’ name. Like, one time I had a child and, and I said, um, we, we use art materials (aside, to child, “beautiful!”) we use art materials to do our family. So I gave like a little circle for them to stick. I gave them like a, I, I, did a pattern of a blouse, and then they stick it. And then um, a skirt, a pants, and I will tell them. “Color the pattern” as to which color, they, they, most like to see their family. And then, um, they do-(Aside, to child, “No, [child’s name]!”) and then I will tell them, “let’s write your family’s name. So who is this? ‘Oh, this is my mommy’ So what’s your mommy doing?” Sometime they just write “Mommy.” “Mommy” and who is this? “Daddy” but they don’t really know my mom’s name is “Marta” and my dad is “Carlos.” So, I, we would, em, inform the parents you know we need to teach the children about the parents’ name or other family members… name. So, um, then also we would, em, after that we would have snack. After the discussions. But if it’s a, ahm, if it’s a letter that I would be working with, em, we will identify the letter “F,” the capital and lower case “F”. The sound of the letter “F”. What we can write with “F”. Like, “fish,” “frog,” “flower,” all of those. Um, we would sing songs, and (?) how the “F” says, “fff”. And, different little things like that. And, then snacks, after snack it’s when I would give them, the worksheet. A paper where they would maybe do color, paint, cut, trace, write, circle, whatever, we would have planned for that day. Then, after we finish that. Maybe I would read them a story, like the “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” Different stories… so, um. And then, after the story we will do like a little discussion. Like, I will ask them, did Goldilocks found three or four plates, so, you know? Little questions to see if they were, paying attention or they got the plot. So, and then after that we will just try to clear up, because sometimes we take down things, clear up and, em, go outside, if they want to go outside, or, watch a video if they want to stay inside. Whatever they want to do because after that time is just for us to wait for the parents to come for them, they either come and pick them up or they bring food for them for the ones who stay. Or they, um, they take them, the ones who *no come bak* later no come bak, or they take them and
bring them back, and that’s it for the morning. And basically, it will be, it will be repeated for the ones that would come only in the afternoon. But most of the time it will be like only one. So what I would normally do when it’s like that, we go over with the three and four, with the one with the afternoon, we’d sing the national anthem, and so, so that they can also, em, listen to it and sing. And then, em, the same activity for that child, but maybe I would have a different work for the others. And then while they are doing the work I will tell him, one-to-one, you know. Can you tell me which letter is this? And then, it will be more like one to one.

KPM: So the afternoon kids have the opportunity to get more one-on-one, um,…instruction…personal…

P.T.: More, yes. Because if we are like, only one, so, if, I get the group and I would tell them, em, “What letter is this?” like, they will not give them to opportunity…(aside, to child, “Go to the bathroom with [child’s name]”) if the opportunity to him, to respond. So while they are busy maybe with a exercise book activity, em, I have more time with him. Cuz, basically it’s only him, so. It’s more like that.

KPM: All right. So…at this point it’s the last day, its wrapping up it’s the end of the year. How do you feel about the progress your class has made since you started?

P.T. Well I feel good. And confident because um I put a lot of me in them. And although right now they are like, “Ugh, Teacher, we done know like that’s the ABC, and we know already that’s ABC and the letter, the sound”, like that’s the we- way how they are right now already. So, um, I can see that they, they, they know it. Well, not everybody, but most of them. Because, you know, it’s not all of them who will grasp it. But, em, the ones who don’t know all of them. Because, sometimes I will write it, and I will ask them to go and say it. Say, “Teacher! Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!” So, they would go and they would say it. And em, and I feel confident that they are ready. I don’t know, but I feel confident. Although, some of them it’s only one year that they came. And it would have been good if they had come from they are three. Because would be in one level first and then they would be here and then they, they start here, um, like from in-between because, em, it’s ah, ah, ah, a different curriculum. One curriculum is for level one the other is for level two. So like they miss that part or what I, I try to do sometimes in that case is that I try to, em, since I have been in both levels, I try to do that in free play. Like for example, the letter “p,” they cover it in in level one, because it’s, um, the first month is my preschool center so they do the letter “p”. So what I would do is that I would do, em, cover it during free play. And then I will, I will go give the snack, sometime not as effective as…But then em, what we would also ask the parents that like, you know, um, this is what we are working so, um, since your child is only one year, if you can, to send him or her to the afternoon, too. So that it can, em, help him to enhance the other skills that happen in level one. Because, sometimes its’ too much work for them to, to – well although, the way how I see it is that, em, sometimes here…(come sit down here…child speaking) so um, sometimes, I no know…I feel…a bit, em, frustrated if I should use that word. Because, sometimes, the parents, em, they would bring their child only one year. And their child come from zero, zero nothing because maybe they might not, they are children that they don’t like to watch TV, programs. And then on top of that the parents they leave to work when their child is asleep and they come back when their child is sleeping already. So sometimes they don’t put their input. And, then the babysitter either, and then they wa- they want you as a teacher to, to do it! And like if, you, when, when it’s not working to the speed that they want, it’s like, “you’re not a good teacher! For what we’re paying so much?” or you know? Some parents goes like that. Because, here they’re paying a lot…But I think it’s very important for them to send them the two years so they can get the, the two curriculums, the ones for level one and the ones for level two.
KPM: Very interesting…about. So you encourage…all families to start, go ahead and start them at three…and start them at the level one because you think that the ones that have both years are…even better prepared maybe?
P.T.: Well, yes. I would say so.,
KPM: And the curriculum is given to level one as well? From the Ministry? For three year olds?
P.T.: Yes! Mhmm.
KPM: Oh, that’s interesting.
P.T.: It’s two…curriculum. Let me see if I have it….cause I have it for quite a while…but I have my one here…
KPM: Oh I see!
P.T.: It’s marked here. Level two.
KPM: Yeah! Right. It says everything that you should be covering.
P.T. Yes, it tells everything that you should be covering.
KPM: Ohhh…
P.T. And me, well, me sometimes I add other things, that, as to Belize. This is a picture that we use…
KPM: Very interesting.
P.T. So, these are the different themes, that we cover. See…
KPM: Ohh…and this is continuing from level one where it says eleven?
P.T.: Yes…Mmhmm…so it’s…I’m not sure if it’s already, on level one…I think it has it but it doesn’t have it….yeah, see here? This is the level one, one. And this is the different topics of level two.
KPM: Yeah…mhm. So let me ask you-
P.T.: It’s two different…
KPM: I’m gonna snap a picture, but let me continue. Alright, so this is the, one of the parent questions. You were talking about, some parents understand how important it is to start them early and also to do some more activities at home. So, overall, do you feel satisfied with the participation level of parents of the preschoolers in your class?
P.T.: What you said?
KPM: Overall, do you feel satisfied with the participation level of the parents…of the preschoolers?
P.T. Umm, I would say….yes and no. (laughs)
KPM: Yes and no! Ok! Yeah!(laughs)
P.T.: Because, um, sometimes, they are…most of the- them yes. But then sometime there is one who, who, um, who is not putting their part. But then they want to come and...(speaks to a child in the room) like for example I had this child one day and, both of his parents are police. And they are not here, they have to travel to Belize City, everyday. So now, the babysitter brings him and takes him to school, and. But that day, she had her day, and then she came for him, and. And, normally like the next day…I prepare my work for twenty-fi, twenty-six I have right now, of them. So if you don’t come I will just put on a little corner “absent” for you. So, at the, on Friday, we will get a- every Friday we give them the all the, the weeks work. So now, that day by mistake I just hold the um, because I staple them and I put them together one, “they come for their child, so let me get their work…” That day, I just hold it and I gave that child, a parent, we work with his child. So now, when the parent came and I, well I didn’t know that I had given it to somebody else, and I told her…”let me give you his work.” And when I went to give it I cannot find it…and like, she was really upset and she started to tell me things. “That’s not good of you, what kind of
teacher are you?” And like, I felt bad and thing, ‘cause. I had been putting these papers for him and, and now she will act like this. So I just told her well, “sorry, I made a mistake. But, I’ll try to get them back for you.” But, then at the same minute I remembered I had extras too and I hurry compile it and I gave her, so. Um, and she left. The Monday when the child came, the child took out the, the when it was snack time, he, when he took out the snacks, there was the papers…still there. Never checked, never done nothing. And like they were even, like wet and things. So, um, I hold the papers and I put them on the side. ‘Cause I mean…she went off on me and now this? I didn’t felt good, but I didn’t said nothing, I just hold the papers and I put them on the side. So when she came for him I just told the little boy, “You need to take your papers home!” So, when he went and hold the papers, she was like ashamed, I would say, bekah, “Why you bring dis? This was for you to work at school!” And she just pull the papers and pull the child and she left!

KPM: Wow.

P.T.: So, like, I mean, all of us make mistake. And I, and I think we should understand. Like, say, like, she…maybe she di- I don’t say that she, she’s not, she doesn’t want to put her part, maybe she had to work. But then, um, we should, em. Well I communicate with her, I said, well, I’m sorry that I made a mistake. But then I went and I copied the papers. But, um, sometimes those things like that make for the week or for the day will make you feel…like you’re working so hard and this is the reaction. But then on the other hand there are also parents who come and bring you up and make you feel good again. (laughs)

KPM: Right.

P.T.: So, um, I, to me in this class, um, the majority of my parents I would say that up to their reactions to me they’re satisfied with what I’ve been doing with their child. So I feel good about it and I feel confident.

KPM: Are there times when you ask for help of the parents and maybe encourage their participation whether it’s a project or an event or something?

P.T.: Yes.

KPM: You feel like you can count on them for that…level of participation?

P.T.: Yes, I have, em, we, eh, in the preschool, we have the, the, month of March. That’s the stimulation month, we call it. That’s when different, em, activities go around. Like, Parent Day, um, Grandparents visit, visit to the dentist, we have the, um, the dentist come in to school. And the dentist give them a checkup. And, and like since, em, it’s like a doctor who’s coming in, the, I, we ask the parents who, who can come in to help us around. Um, I have a, a few of them who they are always willing to, to help around. We also have, em, for the first day, we have a opening parade. Where we go and give a parade and sometimes we take floats. And we would ask parents, you know, we would like if you can help us with, a, balloons. Um, shilling water for us to take. Different things…(speaks in Spanish to someone in background) Yes. Normally during like, and like for, different things that we do, like “Children’s Day” we would ask them to donate something for us to do a little thing. We have “Sports Day” then we would ask them to, to, donate maybe ideels, so we can give the children a little treat. And, em, most of them, they would, em, the majority I would say in my class. They would be willing. And, and I have some of them who would tell me, “What else you need? What else?” So, we have all different types. So, and, with, when, sometime some of them, they would say, “Hmmm, I working and I wonder if I could make it.” And they start to put, like, little excuses. But, it’s mostly most of them who will be willing to help.

KPM: Very good. All right.

P.T.: Uh-huh.
KPM: So, tell me about some of the activities or lessons that your students enjoy the most. What do they like the most?
P.T.: Uh, they like painting. They like painting, they like cutting. When we work with cutting with scissors. Ah, they like cutting with scissors. Um, when we use different art materials to do maybe a collage of something. They enjoy that. They enjoy doing arts.

KPM: Arts, arts and crafts.
P.T.: So, um, normally, I would set aside Fridays to do something like that. Depends on what we have been working. Then Friday would be a day…it all depends how I see. Because sometimes, if it’s raining, sometimes on Fridays they don’t send them. So maybe I would switch it to maybe on Wednesday and what I would do on Wednesday switch it to Friday. Because maybe they, the art will be done on Wednesday and the work can be done on Friday. Or and then I can the ones who were not here on Friday. We can do on, free play for them on Monday. So normally, different activities that we would do, together, and. But I think they love cutting and doing arts, um, painting. Especially when they have to mix one color with the next one. (laughs) They like that. Yes, that’s how I taught them the colors. So, from then, that day, every time when we paint, “I want the other color, too. So I can mix it and see what color it’s going to be!”

KPM: Yeah.
P.T.: And, that’s what they like to do a lot.

KPM: It sounds like you give them a lot of opportunity for hands-on activities. And that’s what they seem to be enjoying the most. When they can use their hands and fingers to manipulate.
P.T.: Yes. Because at the beginning of the year we ask the parents for a list of materials and that will include a bottle of paint. So we put it up for the year. And whenever we are going to do something we just pull it out and use it. So, materials like that, we have. But the, the hard part is the, the resources like getting different games.

KPM: Yeah.
P.T.: Sometimes it’s very ex- here it’s very expensive. It’s not like you can go to a shop where…sometimes I hear in the States it’s a dollar shop, where you can buy.

KPM: Yes! I personally was surprised how many things they’re adding in for teacher supplies at the dollar store. Yeah!
P.T.: Yes, but here, no. Here, everything, it’s bought. Everything you have to buy. Well, this year, I, I, em, what the University wants to do is to, to do like a Montessori. But, em, I want to get my trays. ‘Cause I went to a Montessori school and I saw most of the things are on trays. Like puzzles, they’re on little trays and the children will get the trays. They go to the table they do it or they go on the mat and they do it. Then the put it up again and they put up the tray. So, um.

KPM: So it’s organized that way.
P.T.: Like it’s more organized. And I want to, um, do like more different games, that I have in mind. For this new year. After I went to visit that school, I, I got a lot of different ideas. And the thing is that, um, well I don’t know about you guys up there but here it’s like more difficult. Because we are in the school all day. And the only free day that we have is like during the weekend. And then weekend schools are not open so that you can go check their school and get ideas and see how they do that poster or the other things. So that you can do it.

KPM: That’s a good question. Uh, when I worked, ‘cause I worked as a lead teacher for the two-year-old classroom. They worked into our work schedule days where we would do professional training and then they would send us to somebody else’s classroom to observe. And that was part of- it wasn’t like a regular, regular thing, but when you first started. They wanted you to, like,
observe a lot of other experienced teachers…to see what they do. And I found that to be…very helpful. Yeah.
P.T.: Mmmhmm, because you get ideas as to, “Oh, this can work.” And, and. And then this year I have some of them where, (exclaims) their behavior!
KPM: Mmm. Behavior problems, now?
P.T.: (laughs) Ah, like, the one who was sitting there. Oh my.
KPM: (laughs) Lots of energy! (laughing).
P.T.: But that’s, uh, like half of him near, before when he started here, oh my! Sometimes I would, ooh, get exhausted by midday I was exhausted with him already.
KPM: Yeah.
P.T.: So, like, whatever you tell him, it doesn’t work. So, his grandmother live right there, so she tells me, “when he doesn’t want to listen you tell him I’m right there by the window.” I don’t know if you remember-
KPM: OK! (laughs)
P.T.: I said, ‘somebody’s by the window.’
KPM: I thought it was Mom maybe.
P.T.: His grandmother. So, um. But, sometimes he would answer me, “I don’t want to do that!” So I tell him, “Come let’s join the group! Everybody is doing it.” And then, if you leave him to do what he do. He, he would then, start to do it and he would turn, turn and, and hit somebody. And things like that. So, if we are here and we are doing something and then he would see once we do that, “OK”, he’ll do it. I, I have given him the opportunity to stay there. Don’t force him to join the group. But then, he would just turn, and, and, and, hit the others. But then the next thing is, if I allow him to do what he wants to do, then the others will want. And everybody will want and nobody will want to come and listen…here to the group discussion that we would have. So before he was…more. And then um his parent said the other day that they have seen a big improvement in their behavior.
KPM: That must feel good!
P.T.: Because even them they said they didn’t know what else to do! But, em,
KPM: Do you feel like…things you’re doing here, at least maybe the routine and the socialization…might be helpful?
P.T.: I think socialization because, the only punishment that we do here and I don’t recall I do it this year with them.

1:12:02
P.T.: And then if there would be more than one, I would tell her, “How many cars are coming?” You know, we’re counting. Um, which one is big and which one is small? We would come out and take rides on our bicycle and we would be sharing with each other. And then they would say, “Mommy, um, why that shop is closed?,” you know. ‘Cause I would have to explain, “Oh, because it’s a holiday and on holidays, you know, most of the places are closed.” Or, “Mommy, what is that name up there on that shop?,” you know? Different little things like that. And…
KPM: So they learn about the world around them when they’re exploring.
P.T.: Uh-huh, and then I will tell her, em, “That’s a car and that’s a bicycle. And all of those are land transportation, so, do you think that if we go on a boat we will go on the road?” And different little discussion that-
KPM: To make them think.
P.T.: Mmhmm, yes. And different things around, they see and community helpers they see around.

“Who is that man and who is that lady, why is she wearing a full white?” “Oh, because she is a nurse or she is a doctor.” And, um, “Where did that girl work?” “At the hospital.” And, you know? Like that, so. I believe that to all levels. Although we, we like how we are adults already, we feel shy. And, only when we have a child we, we show it through the child. But, I think play, goes to all levels to me. I believe so, I don't know. It's the way how I see it. Because I, that's how I go with my children. When I changing them I tell them, "See the your shirt is blue and it has buttons, let's count how many buttons." And, and then sometimes my older one, "Mommy you didn't ask me what color is my shirt today." Like sometimes you are in a rush! "You didn't ask me about my shirt today." You see, or sometimes I will tell her, "You can dress yourself next time, you button like this, zip like this." So sometimes she would say, "Surprise!" When she would come out, "I dress myself! See, Mommy? I put on a red shirt, and a blue pants." So if you, if you constantly do that to your child, the child will tell you, "I put on a red shirt and a blue pants."

KPM: Right. But it's how you're training them. Even at home and also here in the class with your students.

P.T.: Yes. Like sometimes, some of the difficulty sometimes I find is that sometimes parents they want to send them to preschool and they're not even potty trained. And then they want you to potty train the child, while you have the amount of children you saw in this class! And then, you have to do your academically, with the children, and on top of that if the child is poo you have to run and go change that child. What time are, are you coming back?

KPM: And you have a short, you have a pretty short schedule. To work with, so.

P.T.: Mmhmm. That's what I say, sometimes it's, it's very hard. And then afterwards you would say that we are not competent, because of that. But, then I mean, the time that I would take to go change a child and come back….I know we have accidents. I, I don’t mind. But then, em, for you to send your baby not potty trained… it’s very difficult. Rather than sometimes, we tell them, well, they say, “Well I’m potty training my child, but he’s not really potty trained.” So, when, when he needs to poo well, he’s not going to poop through that time, but, the pee will that we would advise them to wear the pull ups. So, and from there we work. And, but it’s difficult because we have to leave the class to go and, check on that child. And, eh, what if that the child is, em, not em, tipping scale and sometimes they are running and they can get hurt, right there on some steps, you know? It’s hard to just leave your class to go and tend to the child. (Bye, [Child’s name]).

KPM: One last question that you made me think of (laughs). Uh, do you ever get the challenge from a parent that says, “How come the children are playing so much?”

P.T.: Yes…

KPM: And then you have to explain everything you just said.

P.T.: Yes. Like, sometimes they would come and I say- like at the beginning of the year we have play dough because parents bring play dough in their list so I would give them play dough. And then, um, I will ask them to “Ok, I want you to form for me the number one.” So when the parent leave them, they would see playing the kids play. So now, um, maybe we are finished and maybe the sun is too hot, or, you know I don’t want to take them outside, or we go and then we come back in because the sun is too hot sometimes, here it gets so hot. So we come, and then I would ask them, “Do you guys want to play with play dough?” And they will say, “Yes!” So now, when the parent come back they're playing with play dough.

KPM: Again!

P.T.: Again. So sometimes you would have some parents say that, “That teacher, she, she just, um, plays with the play dough.” Or sometimes, um, when they ask the child, “What you did today?”
“Nothing.” You know, sometime you have student that say, “nothing.” So like, the parent would say, “Nothing? You did nothing?” So. “And I left you, you were playing play dough. I went to pick you up you were playing with play dough. And you did nothing? So that means maybe you spent the whole morning doing play dough?” So like, or sometimes when they would come maybe we would be playing. “Hide and Seek.” So I would have a child turn his face to the wall and count and then the others would run and hide, you know. And that makes noise and, and then, um, em, if they would go under the table there and then they maybe I would go and find them. And then I would say, “I found you!” And when I go under the table like that they will scream! You know? And then, when the parents would say like, “What are you doing? I’m not paying for my child to just come and play.” But they’re not seeing what is behind it…so. Yes, a lot of times we, we get that. Well they, sometimes they don’t come to me the go to the principal and tell her. And, and then she would come and tell me. Well I will explain you know what this is what we’re doing and I planned to do this. Because this is my, what I’m assessing in this right? And sometimes, um, those are games for them to, to enhance their learning, too, it’s not-KPM: Motor skills, yeah! Socialization.
P.T.: Uh-huh. When we, we go to the playground there a, a lot of them are afraid to swing on the swing. Some of them they’re afraid to climb on the ladder and slide. And the assessment booklet asks us for that. Do, em, can the child climb a ladder? Can the child, em, run and stop suddenly? Can the child, em, hops two or three times? Balance himself, or herself? You know? Those are different skills that they need to develop and they, it can only be done through play! I can’t, em, bring a ladder and one by one, “Ok, climb the ladder up and climb down.” I can’t, you know, it would be ridiculous to have these children doing that like that. So. I, and, and, the best for them to get it is through play. (Child interrupts, Speaks to child in Spanish).
KPM: So that concludes all of questions. And we’ve gone way over but you’ve exceeded my (laughs) expectations.
P.T.: (Speaks in Spanish to parents picking up child).
KPM: Pam, thank you so much.
P.T.: (Continues speaking to parents in Spanish).
KPM: Pam, thank you so much for your time. We’ve gone way over but, you’ve given me so much information.
P.T.: Thank you.
KPM: We covered all of the questions and even more than I expected! So thank you so much I appreciate you time.
P.T.: Ok. Thank you.
KPM: It was great meeting you and observing your classroom today.
P.T.: Mmhmm.
### CASE ONE: AT A GLANCE

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#### Demographics:

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<td>CASE TWO: AT A GLANCE</td>
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Appendix J
Researcher Bio Sketch

The researcher, Krysta Murillo, is a Belizean-American scholar and educator. Murillo has lived and attended schooling in the United States and Belize since childhood. Murillo attended elementary grades in the United States and primary grades in Belize off and on. Following primary education, Murillo received secondary and higher educational instruction exclusively in the United States. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Florida International University in 2007, Master of Arts degree in Curriculum & Instruction, Early Childhood Education from the University of Houston in 2010, and is completing her doctoral studies in the same field at the Pennsylvania State University.

An area of concern was the researcher’s beliefs and the possible influence that may have been imposed on the study. As a parent of young children, an early childhood educator and a dual citizen of the United States and Belize, the researcher has a personal interest in the concept of school readiness and as a member of the communities of the US and Belize. The researcher brings to this study her experiences, memories, and thoughts regarding school readiness, play, and academics in early childhood in both the US and Belizean cultural communities. It is important to recognize this vested interest outright yet in no way does this present a conflict of interest. In qualitative research, it is understood as a benefit to having a personal interest in the study topic according to Moustakas (1994).

The researcher kept a study journal in which to record personal notes and reflections as the study emerged. The researcher recognized her personal beliefs as important to the study and kept the journal to keep my interests separate from the data collection and analysis process. Finally, she allowed for the data to speak for itself. Namely, she analyzed interview data for content and themes that emerged as opposed to applying preconceived notions to the data or by sifting the data to find ideas that reflected personal opinions. Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to follow the participants’ views and interests. Member checking was used throughout the analysis process to include participants’ reflections on the analysis of study data. The researcher ensured that the meanings that emerged from the data reflected the participants’ views as accurately as possible.

Murillo touts an insider’s view to this dissertation study through her cultural awareness and participation in Belizean society as a member of the diasporic community. She possesses insights into the Belizean education system through her recollection of attending early childhood centers and primary grades in several schools in Belize. Murillo is familiar with the Belizean teaching, guidance, and leadership style based on these experiences. Culturally, these notions are not new instances but are rather a familiarity based on her prior knowledge and exposure.

Murillo also acknowledges an outsider view in presenting this research study as an educator trained in the United States. The practices that Murillo adopts follow the Western educational approaches to early childhood education. With this lens, the researcher notes the methods of early childhood instruction deemed "best practices" in the United States while given credence to the need for understanding and respecting culturally specific practices in other nations. As such, the researcher finds it necessary to employ culturally sensitive frameworks such as developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (DCAP) by Hyun (1998) and developmentally and contextually appropriate practice by Tobin (2009) when discussing educational approaches in this specific culture.

This study fulfills a lifelong dream for the researcher to conduct a study of Belize's educational system. A close look at Belizean preschool education allowed Murillo to reflect on prior experiences in Belizean schools, recall early childhood memories, and contribute in some way to increasing global recognition to the small but proud country of her ancestry. Murillo hopes this study will prove useful in adding to literature on awareness of global initiatives of early childhood program quality and success.
Lloydia Krystal Murillo

Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

- Ph.D., Curriculum & Instruction, Early Childhood Education, The Pennsylvania State University, May 2018
- M.A., Curriculum & Instruction, Early Childhood Education, University of Houston, 2010
- B.A., English, Florida International University, 2007

TEACHING APPOINTMENTS

Visiting Assistant Professor, The University of Tennessee–Chattanooga
2016-Present

EDUC 3090 (Exceptional Young Children) Fall 2016 semester, 16-week course
EDUC 4300 (Gifted and Talented Children and Adults) Fall 2016 Semester, 16-week course
ECHD 4450 (Home, School and Community Partnerships) Fall 2016 semester, Spring 2017, 16-week course
ECHD 3450 (Management of Early Childhood Environments) Fall 2016 semester, Spring 2017, 16-week course

Adjunct Faculty, The Pennsylvania State University- Berks Campus
2011-2016

- ECE 451 (Instruction in Early Childhood Education Derived from Development Theories) Fall 2012 Semester, Fall 2013 Semester, Fall 2014 Semester, 16 week course
- ECE 479: Child’s Play as Educative process; Fall 2012 semester, Fall 2013 semester, Spring 2014 semester, Fall 2014 semester, 16 week course

LANGUAGES

- English: Native Speaker
- Spanish: Conversant
- Portuguese: Reading Competency