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Children's play, early literacy, and educational (in)equities.

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CHILDREN’S PLAY, EARLY LITERACY, AND EDUCATIONAL (IN)EQUITIES

By

Jane E. Andris
B.A., Kenyon College, 2001
M.S., Bank Street College of Education, 2007

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Education and Human Development
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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum and Instruction

Early Childhood and Elementary Education
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2018
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A Dissertation Approved on

November 9, 2018

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Dr. Lori Norton-Meier, Dissertation Committee Chairperson

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Dr. Ann Larson

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Dr. Jill Jacobi-Vessels

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Dr. Bronwyn Williams
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children

Carroll Emlyn

and

Lela Jane

who, in this endeavor, have pushed me and pulled me in equal loving measure.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my advisor, Dr. Lori Norton-Meier, for showing early interest in my experiences and ideas and unwavering support for my work, and I thank the members of my committee, Dr. Ann Larson, Dr. Jill Jacobi-Vessels, and Dr. Bronwyn Williams, for sharing their varied expertise and their valuable time as I worked to make sense of my research site. I also thank Dr. Kathy Whitmore and Dr. James Chisholm for giving me opportunities to work alongside them as an early researcher. I have enjoyed the collegial camaraderie of my fellow graduate students, and I am appreciative in particular of my friendships with Mikkaka Overstreet and Emily Zuccaro. I am grateful to my colleagues at Kentucky Country Day School, most of all to Sue Sessions and Halle Nussbaum for the enthusiasm and understanding they showed me over many years. Many dear friends have sent their love and kept me afloat from near and afar. I would like to express my love, admiration, and gratitude to my parents, John Andris and Melissa Evans-Andris, for demonstrating to me, first by example and, later, through their characteristic insistent encouragement, the importance of pushing boundaries and realizing accomplishment. Finally, Carroll and Lela, my beloved children, who feel born of this opus, have been most giving of all, and I am deeply grateful to and proud of them for the roles they have taken up as we have made this journey together.
ABSTRACT

CHILDREN’S PLAY, EARLY LITERACY, AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES

Jane E. Andris

December 14, 20018

This study is about the inclusion of play in early childhood school settings, the contested nature of curricula that are not strictly quantifiable, and the ways that institutional inequity influences children’s access to school-based play. It is situated in a public elementary school kindergarten that centered play in the curriculum with varying degrees of support from a range of stakeholders. This ethnographic phenomenological case study depended on data collection methods of observational field notes and participant interviews, and grounded theory methods were employed for analysis. Findings were that teachers and administrators need clearer understandings of play and its integral connection to early literacy practices so they are valued and implemented in early childhood settings. Additionally, the voices of marginalized student populations and their families are excluded from institutional decision-making processes, which has the effect of silencing or controlling their participation in educational opportunities.
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INTRODUCTIONS AND GETTING STARTED: A PROLOGUE

On the morning of the first day of school the mood in Jenni’s class was strikingly calm, even after the children began to enter. Twenty kindergarteners, some not yet five years old, were delivered to the classroom amidst quiet tears, shy smiles, and jovial struts. Jenni’s assistant Rose stood by the entrance to the room, tall and graceful, and ladled water over each child’s hands as they walked through the door before handing them a small towel to dry off with. The blond woods of the furniture, the simple hand-drawn alphabet hanging along one wall, and the long white curtains softening the sunlight created a homey sense of comfort, which apparently was picked up on by the children, who, despite having been given no explicit instructions, were all sitting quietly in a row on a bench. Eventually, a bell rang and Jenni motioned for the children to join her along the edge of a large ovular rug, where she began to sing to each child in turn, according to the color of his or her shirt: “Good morning, little purple bird, purple bird, purple bird! Good morning, little purple bird! Who are you? [child sheepishly approaches, whispers his name, and she continues to sing] His name is little Kelvin bird, Kelvin bird, Kelvin bird! His name is little Kelvin bird! Now fly back home!”

I approach this study steeped in my identities, each one unique among the others but also overlapping with them to the point that finding boundaries, let alone maintaining
them, seems impossible. One methodological home for my data from this study is autoethnography, which not only tolerates the interconnectedness of identities and of stories but also is rooted in the blurring of “boundaries between research and practice” (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010, p. 451).

Transversing the blurred boundaries of myself in this study, I am a teacher, first, with a deep affinity for my experiences immersed in the ideals of Progressive Education during my graduate studies. I have a strong belief in and commitment to the success of public education and the elusive promise for a democratic society it embodies, though for a variety of reasons I have been teaching for twelve years in a traditional private school in the city in which I was raised. Over time, I have come to care deeply for my colleagues, and it has been a good job, and challenging and rewarding, but every so often, an experience at work, with a parent, perhaps, or another teacher, will remind me that I’m in a world apart, where snobbish comments implying a lesser value of a public school education, or implying that the children who attend public schools are wilder or less driven, or even implying that parents who do not invest in a private school education are shirking their parental responsibilities, will call up the reputation this school had amongst my peers and me at our local public high school.

I teach four- and five- year olds, which I have learned is a contested age, straddling as it does the years of preschool and elementary school, of play themes in one context and the imposition of standards and testing in another. Of course, children do not change, per se, but the social constructs around them certainly do, so whereas this specific age group was a part of my favorite fieldwork experience in graduate school in New York, where I worked with fours and fives in a kindergarten classroom, here in
Kentucky the children must be five before they enter kindergarten, and it is common practice for families to wait even longer, until they are six.

Over the course of my doctoral program, I’ve been involved in several projects as a researcher prior to conducting this dissertation study. I have foregrounded this researcher identity in research opportunities, though never fully masking the other identities. In one research site, I worked under two professors leading an ethnographic study on family literacy in a residential program for single parents and their children; the parents were hopeful first-generation college graduates. We attended community meetings, participated in the building of a new playground for the resident children, and conducted workshop-type events for the families, some of which were solicited by the program leaders and some of which were inspired by our research directions. I conducted a series of interviews with one young mother, an aspiring college graduate, and shadowed her as she nervously sent her older daughter into the public school system as a kindergartener.

In another research opportunity, as part of an evaluation team, I observed at an after-school museum program for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds at a nearby public elementary school. In this setting, which had been billed as an enrichment program to the children’s families, volunteer undergraduates from a local college of education taught from a scripted curriculum that had little apparent meaning or authenticity in the personal lives of the children. They responded accordingly; that is, they were dismissive of the activities, disruptive to the volunteer leaders, and generally disgruntled, presumably because their afternoons were given over to transmission-model
instruction—an extension of their school day—delivered by adults who seemed to care little for their interests.

My most recent experience in the research field, the one that led to this current study, started two years ago in a kindergarten classroom located in an elementary school that had received special permission, through a contest for innovative approaches to education, to adopt a Waldorf-inspired curriculum. Over the course of the school year, I observed in the classroom for nine full days and eight additional half-days, and conducted interviews with a parent and the principal, along with several formal, semi-structured interviews and many informal conversational interviews with the lead teacher in my focus classroom. She was a coauthor of the original proposal for the innovative model, and was emotionally as well as professionally vested in the success of the school. There were tensions from the beginning between the school and the school district, and as early as the first school year of operation it seemed possible that the model would be pulled and the school would revert to being a traditional elementary school. It should be noted that I used that term advisedly; in the school district to which I refer, there are magnet schools that call themselves Traditional Schools. This does not mean that the other schools are Progressive and in fact most public schooling in this district would be considered at least modestly traditional by education researchers and scholars.

Eventually, it was decided that the model would be retained for a second school year, which was the 2016-17 year during which I conducted field observations. However, in January of that year there were rumblings again of the model being pulled, and in the end it was pulled and the school reopened as a regular school the following fall. I continued to conduct research as a part of this study, not so much at the physical
site as at the theoretical site of the school’s existence, through follow-up interviews with my teacher and parent participants.

One identity that was foregrounded along with that of researcher in these research sites was my identity as a white person. I connect with Ali (2015) when she writes, “As a White person, it takes a lot of work for me to see racism at work” (p. 12). For me, part of that work has been being aware of my whiteness even when I am surrounded (as I am much of the time) by people who are also white, but recent opportunities for me to notice my whiteness in glaring ways, both visually and theoretically, have been in these research sites.

In the family literacy project, there were white and black researchers (the professors were a white woman and a white man; the graduate students were a black woman and me) and white and black participants. In what could have been inadvertent but seems to me to have been rooted in our collective racialized identities, each of us researchers paired with a participant who match our race and gender, leading me to wonder how deeply we could interrogate the inequities we were studying, how critically aware we could truly be without explicit conversations with each other as researchers and with our participants, in which we did not engage.

In the other two research sites, I was aware that the people holding powerful capital (the head of the program, her assistant, and the volunteer leaders at the after school program; most of the lead teachers, the principal, the parent participant, and the children attending the magnet program in my study; in both cases, me, the researcher there to understand a story) are white, and most of the people over whom this power is wielded in one way or another (the children and their school bus monitors from the
afterschool program; the children, most of the teacher’s assistants, parents who did not participate, most of the children who had been assigned to attend the school in my study) are people of color, in these particular cases, black.

In both of these settings, the power wielded or not wielded has been a metaphoric voice, meaning that some voices are heard, and others are silenced; some voices are solicited and others are absent. In an ironic twist that has had significant impact on my experiences as a researcher, my attempts to hear the voices of those I knew had been marginalized by the societal constructs of race and class were often stymied by my own whiteness and the ways I was perceived by potential participants. Similarly, my attempts to interrogate these norms with white participants sometimes resulted in what felt like an identity-hijacking, such as when my interview with the white female founder of the after school program seemed to project her deficit perspective of the students involved onto me as though our shared whiteness bled into other class- and race-based attitudes and perceptions when, in fact, it did not.

My identity as a white person overlaps with my identities as a researcher and as a teacher. In fact, whether I am consciously aware of it or not, my identity as a white person shapes most of my experiences. Part of the work that Ali (2015) describes involves becoming more consistently conscious and looking, as Paley (2000) does, into the hidden curriculum in schooling to discover my own identity and, I hope, to permit and even promote the existence of the identities of my students.

Finally, nestled carefully amongst these varied and nuanced and evolving identities lies a personal me: I am a mother. I have two children, both of whom were born after I started my doctoral program. This year, just days before the cutoff for entry
into kindergarten, my older child, my son, turned 5. He too is straddling the years of nursery school and elementary school, and we decided to send him into the system of public education. If we wished, we could have requested that he be sent to the school in which I conducted my research, where race and class clashed and where the voices of the poor and the black people were not heard.

And so you see, my researcher eyes, and my white person eyes, were not the only eyes observing in that classroom. My teacher eyes and my mother eyes were watching as well.

**The Teacher: Jenni**

“Mommy!” “Hello, Benton!” Jenni’s children and husband come in from their days at school, grandmother’s house, and work. Her 6-year-old son is the first one in the door, and I smile and say, “Hi!” He looks at me with sideways glances at his mother, and responds, hesitantly, “Hi.” Jenni answers the questions his eyes communicate, “This is, um, my new friend Janey. She is a preschool teacher. Did you get a cool shirt for school?”

Jenni and I have, in fact, developed a friendship as a result of this project. This is in large part due to her warm, generous personality. When I initially contacted her about her being a participant in the study, she invited me to coffee. Much later, when I asked to conduct yet another interview with her, knowing how hard it is as a teacher to sacrifice a planning period and how hard it is as a working parent to sacrifice time with your children, she invited me to her home. And we do have a lot in common professionally: a joy in young children, a focus on play at school, round-about ways to having become teachers to begin with. As a student of education, she became interested in engaging
children in play with natural materials, and although she initially was intrigued by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood learning, she found more opportunities in our city to explore and participate in the Waldorf approach. After teaching at a local public elementary school in the preschool program and later in the kindergarten, she and a friend responded to a call for proposals for Schools of Innovation. These schools were intended to be a key feature of the approval, in 2013, for the local school district to formally be a District of Innovation, which meant that the district was approved for exemption from certain state Department of Education regulations. Winning proposals would be launched as new magnet schools. The proposal Jenni co-authored, named the Jacaranda Model, was a winner, and the model was implemented in time for the 2015-2016 school year.

“I feel like it’s easier to have worksheets and a curriculum that’s scripted out for you to follow, and you know, it’s harder work for the kids to play, it’s harder for them to draw pictures, and communicate what their drawings are about, and even sequencing their own thoughts….and play is so difficult for them because of the social piece of it, just being able to be in a small group with people and get into their imagination and take turns and it’s just such hard work for them.”

Jenni and I also share many common understandings about the nature of early childhood development. We both see children’s play as a rigorous activity, not to be relegated to the end of the school day as an extra, a bonus children can earn. We both understand that children often demonstrate their needs through their behaviors, and that an intuitive teacher is required to interpret the sometimes unwanted behaviors that children demonstrate as communication issues rather than disciplinary issues.

**Gaining Entry: Suspending and Privileging**
Researchers must consider how they will present themselves to potential study participants (Cicourel, 1964). When we interact with other people, we are enacting a particular identity or combination of identities and thereby suppressing other identities. Autoethnography is a way of recognizing and highlighting this phenomenon toward the goal of deeper understanding of the social and personal experience. “Autoethnography powerfully reminds us that multiple selves are always present, even when some identities are privileged in particular social spaces while others are constrained” (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010, p. 453-454). The suppression or constraint of identities merely positions them; in one’s mind they never go away. This was evident in my initial introduction to Jenni and in my subsequent introductions to her colleagues, her principal, and her students. Jenni’s formal training in education certifies her to be a preschool teacher, and she connected to me primarily through her identification of me as a fellow preschool teacher. I actually think of my professional teacher self somewhat differently; for one thing, I teach in a PK-12 school, so my students are required to participate in the all-school routines characteristic of an elementary school—we eat in a large cafeteria amongst high schoolers, they move through the school to visit special area teachers in other parts of the buildings, and in a general way, we adhere to a school day schedule that is not always paced to match the rhythms of a four- or five-year-old—and for another thing, my dual teaching certificate accredits me to teach children as old as twelve, which is a broad age span and reflects the breadth and depth of the coursework of my graduate studies. In my interactions with Jenni I primarily considered myself a researcher. Insisting on this stance, however, ran the risk of alienating her and compromising our established rapport.
Similarly, I deliberately suppressed my researcher identity when she introduced me to her colleagues. In these cases, she usually said that I was a preschool teacher and a student at the university. My perception was that the people to whom I was introduced in this way assumed that I must be a student teacher visiting in order to observe Jenni’s teaching for the purposes of my own learning. People can react in various ways to knowing that they are in the presence of a researcher, and are generally more at ease when they understand the status of the researcher to be similar or inferior to their own; conversely, they may feel threatened if they think the researcher is in a superior position (Becker, 1970). In addition, because the state had labeled this school a “failing school,” there was a steady stream of state auditors and other school district officials visiting the school throughout the year with evaluative purposes. Thus, I needed to appear to fit in with the school personnel in an unobtrusive way in order to protect my entry as well as the data site itself (Corsaro, 1985). It was important for my research objectives for me to not be associated with any type of evaluative team, and being identified by others as an innocuous preschool teacher or university student helped me gain entry and have a minimal effect on the research site.

The multiplicity involved in how I was perceived by others along with the identities I was enacting, foregrounding, and backgrounding, became competing ways of knowing within me, which in turn brought criticisms to light. Despite our aligned views on many aspects of child development, play, and education, I recognized places of tension, where what I saw in the Jacaranda Model diverged from my own pedagogy. The difficulty I’ve had giving voice to these is another reason I’ve turned to autoethnography. Echoing Freire (2000/1970), Toyosaki & Pensoeau-Conway (2013) write that “we live in
a world we need to change” (p. 558). Because of this, they, and I, choose autoethnography: “We see autoethnography as the critical scholarship that does the labor of sharp critique, interruption, and hope—labor that helps us become smarter for us, for others and for all of us together” (p. 558). Interrogation is an entry point toward social action: interrogating my identities alongside the social act of the research I conducted with Jenni gives rise to the opportunity for change.

The moments of divergence between the Jacaranda Model and the theoretical underpinnings of my own research in and approach to early childhood education became more evident to me as I spent more time at the school. Materials, activities, and responses to children that I initially viewed with ambiguity or even approval later became places of tension for me. I became aware of other tensions as time went on also, both at the school level and at the district level. These tensions were places or moments when the district, the school, or Jenni’s practices fell short of the innovative approach to education that the model was proposed to address in the first place; I’m terming these the “missed opportunities” of the Jacaranda Model.

Going Back: How I Got Here

I realize now that holes have formed in my reporting. Even as I reveal more about myself, more seems left to be revealed. I should backtrack, and describe the research interests out of which my study emerged.

In my first class as a doctoral student, I was assigned to read Finn’s (2009) *Literacy With an Attitude: Educating Working Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest*. As the title suggests, this books explores issues of literacy and education, class and power, with an emphasis on equity and justice both in teaching practices as well as
curriculum content. One of the arguments the author makes is that the agency of schoolchildren, particularly those from the poor and working classes, is formally, implicitly, and explicitly undermined by their school experiences. Finn relies on the theoretical framework of Freire (1970) and proposes that critical literacy be the general objective of educational pursuits, particularly with students who are socially, culturally, and racially marginalized.

The book resonated with me deeply, and I was intrigued about how what he discusses might look like in the context of early childhood education. I found one version of this in Vivian Vasquez’s *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children* (2004), in which a teacher-researcher’s play-based curriculum gives children opportunities to explore issues of social justice and equity and to critically use their own voices to shape their social and educational landscape. Although this book and others like it give teachers a practical guide for conducting critical literacy with children, it does not specifically address the issue of inequities in education itself.

At a literacy research conference several months after reading Finn, I was galvanized by another author and researcher, Karen Wohlwend, whose work I had read and admired, when she declared that “Play is the social justice issue of our time” (Indiana University Discourse Analysis Conference, May, 2013). She was referring to the way that poor and working-class children typically attend schools held more stringently to state and federal educational mandates that are geared toward testing and which leave little room for open-ended and teacher-mediated play as a centerpiece of curriculum. How, I began to wonder, are poor and working-class children affected by a focus on
testing and discipline and a lack of opportunities for open-ended play in the school setting?

Questions, and an Opening

The play yard at the school is massive: a wide open L-shaped space, bordered on some sides by the wall of the school building and on other sides by a tall chain-link fence. Although the neighborhood is generally an urban residential one, just across the street is a large lumberyard bisected by the train track. The incoming and outgoing trains periodically let loose loud whistles. A small section of the yard is fenced off, although the gate separating the big part and the small part always seems open so children come and go. The small section has an old plastic piece of climbing equipment, including a slide; the size and design of the structure would be suitable for very young children but is dwarfed by the crowds of these children who swarm it when they come outdoors. There is also an old, broken sand and water table which holds neither sand nor water. There are many logs and stumps, which the children sit on, climb under or attempt to roll from place to place. The big section has practically nothing: several sapling trees spread far and wide, a tether-ball pole with no ball or tether, and another small collection of logs and stumps. One group of children consistently converges on a patch of bare ground. If it’s been sunny, they can make dust clouds by scratching up a handful of the fine, dry dirt, holding their hands high in the air, and letting it blow out while they run, streaming the cloud behind them. Along the fence that divides the two parts of the playground is a jungle of an overgrown flower garden. Zinnias and butterfly bushes bloom amongst the tall weeds. While the class plays, the teacher drags a hose out and calls small groups of children over for turns at holding the nozzle. One hot morning, a child inadvertently
rousted a rabbit out of the flower bed. The bunny bolted wildly across the play yard, this way and that, with a crowd of excited children right behind, whooping and hollering. He finally scurried under the fence, across the street, and into a pile of pallets at the lumberyard. The fence clanged with the impact of the children’s bodies running up to it and, out of breath, they continued to yell and wave at the rabbit for several minutes more before the excitement died down and they returned to their play.

I was left with questions about class, race, policy, and curriculum that continued to resurface in my studies. I read *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Lareau, 2011), which explores issues of child-rearing practices and educational approaches and institutions within the contexts of race and class and of home and family life. Coinciding with my reading of this text, I spoke casually with an old friend about the connections I’d been making between what I had been reading and what I had been experiencing in research settings. She mentioned her job at a new School of Innovation, where the kindergarteners, as she put it, “play all day.” She continued, “You should talk to the founder of the model. Her name’s Jenni, and I’ll ask her if I can give you her phone number.”

**New Beginnings, Old Baggage**

When the Jacaranda Model was accepted by the school district as the newest School of Innovation, it was assigned to an existing school that had been deemed by the state to be “failing.” Some people, including the authors of the proposal and some school board members, urged that sufficient funding and training toward the implementation be dedicated for better chances for a successful transition and a sustained future (Ross, 2014). Many of these same people, including the proposal’s authors, recommended that
the transition from the old school entity to the new model be a gradual one, with aspects of the Waldorf curriculum being introduced over time. At one point, the new model was promised at least four years to prove itself as a success (McKim, 2017), although markers for this “proof” were never clearly defined.

The overarching missed opportunity here at the district level is that not one of these promises or recommendations were heeded. Teachers were provided with merely a week or two of professional development prior to the start of the 2015-16 school year, and the principal hired to lead the school had no background in Waldorf education. Signature aspects of the environment of a Waldorf school were ignored, including having a natural play area with features for climbing, jumping, balancing, and building. The transition was sudden, and included unilateral decisions by the local school district rather than community- and school-wide conversations. Before the first school year was even half over, the school board had scaled back the Waldorf approach to only be implemented in the kindergarten and 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} grades, while 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 4\textsuperscript{th}, and 5\textsuperscript{th} graders were instructed according to the traditional, district-wide curriculum, and threats were thrown around about the entire model being pulled; by April of the second school year they made good on those threats.

It is interesting to note that in at least two separate situations, plans were laid for features to be added to the play yard at the school. In one of these, a local nursery wanted to donate and transplant a 20-foot-tall sprawling beech tree for the children at the school to use as climbing equipment (Bruggers, 2016). Hailed as a “natural jungle gym,” this mature tree was expected to continue to grow and provide children with opportunities for playing in nature and fulfilling gross motor needs. In another situation, the
playground architect who designed the children’s outdoor play feature at a nearby nature conservatory worked with Jenni to create plans for a natural playground, complete with a water feature, to be built at the school. The plans fizzled due mainly to a lack of funding and it became clearer that the model was unlikely to last past its second year.

The Gap

*Here I am in the principal’s office—I am certainly suppressing identities while I listen to Ms. Bond’s responses to my questions. She doesn’t seem to share my philosophy about play in early childhood...or about many other things, either. She’s been cordial, and relatively accommodating... “I continue to value play but I also value, uh, academics, so for us the challenge has been finding the appropriate balance of play. I don’t think we can have...I think it’s irresponsible to have a day in which play and rest and just those activities happen in the absence of providing kids with some strong foundation skills in literacy....you know, 90% of them are neighborhood kids and 90% are from poverty so, um, through, so all of the opportunity gaps and you know the things like the 3 million word deficit in vocabulary and the rest, we have this, um, this gap.”*

The missed opportunity at the level of school leadership is twofold. First, Ms. Bond demonstrated a limited understanding of the role of play in the early childhood classroom, and she conceptualized play as something that is happening when more academic activities are *not* happening. This is an unfortunate conceptualization, for reasons that harken back not just to child development theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1900/1990), but also critical theorists, such as Freire (2000/1970). She seemed to fail to understand the rigorous ways that play can enrich learning, connect students more authentically to curricular goals, and facilitate social and emotional development.
development alongside cognitive development. Further, I argue that the marginalized population of children she described had more to gain from teacher-mediated school-based play than do children from socially and economically privileged backgrounds. Involving even the youngest learners in their own educational pathways and outcomes heightens interest, motivation, and agency; all of those qualities are compromised by transmission-model forms of instruction.

Second, as the previous excerpt from my interview with Ms. Bond reveals, she viewed the vast majority of the student body through a perspective of deficiency. In giving voice to this perspective to me, a relative stranger and definite outsider, I postulate that she perpetuated this perspective by voicing it also to her faculty and staff. No child is helped when their cultures, their identities, and their ways of knowing are discounted, and the fact that in this case they were being discounted by the very leadership of the educational institution to which they’ve been assigned to attend compromised their constellations of experiences even further. Hiring a principal who openly viewed her student population in this way to lead the Jacaranda Model was a significant missed opportunity.

**Ms. Jenni’s Room**

*In the cozy comfort of Jenni’s living room, the trials of day-to-day classroom life and year-to-year school life seem to be at a considerable distance. I’m interested in the challenges Jenni perceives to her teaching practice of giving children so much time to play. “I really think that there’s this perception in public education that children’s play is not valid, that it’s too, I think it’s too difficult for most to record what is really*
happening, to really understand what is truly happening, um, so it takes a lot more work frankly.”

This study is located in Jenni’s classroom, and I noticed missed opportunities for the Jacaranda Model there, too. Naming these teeters on the verge of betrayal of my friendship with Jenni, and I am reminded of Tomaselli, Dyll-Myklebust, & van Grootheest (2013), who write that autoethnography “applies to the relationship, as well as the negotiations as part of this relationship, between observers and observed” (p. 577).

Jenni’s coursework in her masters program focused on very young children, and she is certified to be an Interdisciplinary Early Childhood teacher (different than an Elementary School certification; the former is for preschool teachers and the latter is for kindergarten-fifth grade) and over time she participated in various Waldorf trainings and certifications. She was not prepared by these educational pursuits to engage in the literacy content elementary teachers are expected to teach. Thus, many of the opportunities that were missed in Jenni’s classroom were a result of her training and background as opposed to her intent and philosophy.

I arrive in the classroom in late February after having been absent since early December. Changes to the room are immediately evident. The gathering rug, once in the center of the classroom with space all around it, is shoved into a corner, presumably to make room for the 5 large tables that now take up the majority of the room’s floor space. The children have booklets the teachers made for them out of stapled-together half-sheets of computer paper. These are their new “I See” books, each organized by a particular letter of the alphabet with accompanying pictures to draw dictated by the chart on the board. Children have been told to “write in their books,” and many of them
painstakingly copy letters from the board that appear next to familiar pictures: a bumblebee, a book, a bat. But many others of them do not seem to have a point of entry for this task and are instead chatting with peers while they wait for a teacher to help. When Jenni comes around to support them, she sounds the words out, careful to isolate each sound dramatically so that they might think of what letter makes the sound. If they do not have a guess, she tells them a letter to write. When helping one girl write “sock,” Jenni enunciated the final /k/ sound and the child wrote a “c.” Jenni then made the /k/ sound again so that the child’s product would have something representing both the “c” and the “k” in sock.

This literacy lesson highlights another missed opportunity regarding the children’s educational experiences while caught in the crosshairs between the Waldorf approach and traditional skill-based expectations. Goodman & Goodman (1990) assert that “language, written language included, is learned most easily in the context of use” (p. 225), and this is supported by other theorists as well (Dewey 1990/1902; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Jenni, one important objective in Waldorf education is to “build capacities” for imagination in children, and teachers address this is by telling stories orally without using illustrations or even actual texts. There were a few tattered children’s books on a shelf in Jenni’s classroom, but the children did not have a context of use based in their classroom experiences on which to rely for the writing in which they were supposed to be engaging in creating their “I See” books. The “I See” books were made even more disconnected and inauthentic by the fact that Jenni had already written what the children were supposed to write; they did not even have the opportunity to compose their own text or make guesses about letters used for extra words they wished to
write. Applying Goodman & Goodman’s idea of the opposing forces of convention and invention in learning and development crystalizes the opportunity that was missed here: in the classroom, students were denied the time and materials to learn about the various conventions of picture books, and they were denied the time and space to make inventions of literacy.

_Kids enter the classroom noisily and angrily from having been outdoors. The teacher calls a class meeting and allows children to take turns airing their grievances with one another. She tries to engage the children in conversations about these problems, but not everyone participates. One boy, new to the class, has complained throughout the morning that no one will play with him. The teacher lets the kids tell him what he does that they don’t like. In the telling, another boy becomes an additional focus. The teacher starts to wrap things up; it is unclear whether the children feel like their problems were solved. “So, what have we learned today about each other? I will tell you!” the teacher exclaims. “You will hurt each other with your mean words. No more using sticks as weapons. When your friend says stop, you need to stop.”_

Another missed opportunity came in the form of Jenni’s response to the inevitable conflicts that emerged between children during their play. She was almost always kind and warm when children approached her with complaints about peers’ behavior. She was often affectionate, particularly when the child coming to her had been hurt physically, or whose feelings were hurt to the point of tears. She generally responded in a way that validated the child, saying, for example, “He hit you? He should not have done that! I’m sorry he did that to you!” Occasionally, if the offender had had several complaints against her, Jenni might pull her aside, hold her hand, or even pass the child to another
teacher while feelings cooled off. However, despite the empathy and care she genuinely seemed to show, rare was the occasion that Jenni mediated a conversation between the children in an effort to resolve the conflict. Sometimes, she would hold group meetings, in which she would firmly admonish the children for so much squabbling, or in which she would allow any child with a grievance to publicly air it. However, a common thread I observed from Jenni toward conflicts between children is that solutions were rarely reached at all and almost never reached in cooperation with the children. Children were not taught to take care of each other, or to listen and respond to each other. They did not get the benefit of holding each other accountable for their physical and emotional safety. Thus, the children as a group demonstrated little progress over the course of the year in their abilities to independently resolve conflicts, and they usually attempted to resolve these by seeking a teacher’s attention. The emotions and logistics of solving problems, which often did not seem to be resolved as evidenced by sulking or taunting children, were entirely connected to Jenni’s involvement.

**Looking Forward, Looking Back**

I’m stuck between the two ends of a spectrum that summertime embodies for teachers: while I ruminate on the errors of this past school year in my own classroom I am simultaneously eager to get started on this coming year. Ineffective strategies in engaging a marginalized learner, too-frequent communications with a set of parents that left me feeling perpetually drained, and thoughts of what-could-I-have-done-differently give rise to visions of new project ideas, shared goals and visions, and thoughts of how-I-will-do-it-next-time. Having critiqued our practices, we act out of hope for what is yet to come.
I am in a similar place in other areas of my life, too. A major juncture in my doctoral studies is near on the horizon. And thought must be given to next steps in my career. I am friends with Jenni now; our children are classmates in kindergarten and we carpool together. As I complete my dissertation, I check in with her to clarify a field note and in the same conversation, ask her when our children’s trip to the pumpkin patch will be. She delights in telling me about someone she met who might help her get a playground at a school she works in now. We cringe together over the missed opportunities of the Jacaranda Model, and we wonder: what is next, and where does hope lie?

In closing this introduction to me, and my research site, I will leave my reader with one more story from the children of Ms. Jenni’s room. This story plays as clearly in my memory as it does when I saw them do it, almost two years ago. Their shouts of laughter, their turn-taking and boundary-negotiating are to this day a shining moment.

The children have invented a game on the slide: one child works at the bottom of the slide to pile as much mulch as she can onto the flat end of the sliding board while the other children, at the top, cajole her to add more. When the layer is several inches deep, she gives the go-ahead as someone comes flying down the slide and plows right into the mulch. Now THAT child is the loader, and while he banters with the children still at the top and others who have come to watch from around the play yard, he hauls the mulch up onto the slide for the next child. Every time a child gets to go down the slide into the mulch, sending the chips flying, the crowd of children cheers.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When I began my doctoral studies six years ago, I came with a practical and theoretical understanding of the importance of play in the lives of children. I had worked with children in informal ways during my younger years as a babysitter and a camp counselor and I knew from my own experiences as a child that one’s imaginative play can be a “model for the life-long practice of trying out new ideas” (Paley, 2004, p. 92). I can recall in particular detail exploring through play the social relationships I experienced in my life at home, at school, and in my community.

I had worked with children in formal settings, too, during my supervised fieldwork in graduate school and in my own classroom as a teacher of four- and five-year-olds, and I had seen children employ play scenarios to process or reconcile challenging social and emotional situations, such as when two children, frightened of wasps on the playground, decided to pretend to be teachers because “wasps don’t sting teachers!” I had witnessed the fluidity of children’s play, such as when a small group of children were playing “bad puppy,” wherein a distraught and beleaguered dog-owner chased after her naughty and giggling puppies. When a child approached the group and argued her case to be a second “puppy mommy,” they reconfigured their game and allowed her to join in the play. And year after year, in the dramatic play kitchen area of
my classroom, I watch children volunteer to be the “big sister” or “big brother,” couching
their desire for authority over the other children with the recognition that they do still
want to be one of the kids in the family.

I also understood from my graduate readings the ways that play primes children
for the circumstances they face in day-to-day life as they grow through childhood and
beyond, in and out of school. When Dewey (1932/1990) writes that children need first
hand experiences “with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their
manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses” (p. 11), he is not
only acknowledging that learning is, at its root, a social endeavor (Vygotsky 1976) but
also that authentic learning experiences are critical in education. Play is authentic to
children, and it is important to provide them with opportunities to play with materials
with which they can, in the company of their peers, explore and enact their ideas and
come to a better understanding of the complex social connections that make up our
society.

Play affects young children’s learning in other ways that are less explicit but just
as important. As Vygotsky (1978) writes, “Play continually creates demands on the child
to act against immediate impulse” (p. 99). Sociodramatic play with peers requires
children to participate in a peer group and act in accordance with the rules, however fluid
they may be. When my former students played “bad puppy,” the puppy mommy had to
restrain herself from joining in the antics of her puppies, regardless of how much fun they
seemed to be having. In ways that might not seem readily apparent to the adults around
them, children learn to control their impulses, and should have ample time to practice this
control, through engaging in play with peers.
Another central understanding of play that I brought with me from my theoretical and practical graduate school experiences to my doctoral studies is the function of play in the development of symbolic and abstract thought. In play, Vygotsky writes, “an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object” (1978, p.101). In marching around a play yard a child can make believe that she is leading a parade; in holding a broken tree branch aloft she can pretend that she bears the grand marshal’s flag. These correlating actions and objects in the play of early childhood are closely resemblant of one another, but their use represents the beginning of a child’s ability to think abstractly.

There were also theoretical and practical aspects of play to which I was introduced or which were emphasized to a greater degree for me upon entering my doctoral program. These included the ways in which play and literacy are intimately connected, and the ways in which societal and institutional constructs affect children’s play, particularly in the school setting. Additionally, I began to read about and notice the ways that identity, agency, and power influence all of these junctures. This dissertation seeks to explore these issues which now, more than ever, are relevant to early childhood education in the public school setting.

This study is about the inclusion of play in the early childhood public school setting, the contested nature of curricula that do not include strictly quantifiable means and ends, and the ways that societal and institutional inequity, including economic, cultural, and educational inequity, influence children’s access to school-based play. It is situated in a public elementary school kindergarten that had centered play in the curriculum with varying degrees of support from various stakeholders. I employed data
collection methods such as observational field notes, participant interviews, and
photographs of artifacts, and grounded theory methods for analysis.

**Contextual Rationale for the Study**

An increasing emphasis on educational policy standards in instruction for young
children has, in recent years, pushed pretend play to the periphery of early childhood
education. The Common Core K-12 grade-by-grade college and career readiness
standards were released in 2010 and today have been adopted by 41 states
(www.corestandards.org). Coinciding with vanishing play—and the regular practice it
provides children in peer-to-peer language use and action-oriented control over one’s
social interactions—is a trend toward teaching a singular school-based literacy in isolated
skills, which affords children little agency over their own learning outcomes, recognizes
but a narrow view of literacies in which children and families engage, and contributes to
the marginalization of many learners.

Public schooling is guided by government-mandated educational standards, and
even though learning and development are more expansive than mere skill acquisition
(Vygotsky 1978), these standards are written with an emphasis on the transfer and
measurement of skills (www.corestandards.org). Limiting what is considered to be
“learning” to isolated skills makes the measurement of student learning easier to capture
and quantify through the ubiquitous standardized tests administered regularly to students
nationwide. Theorists and researchers have long described qualities of play, but an
agreed-upon quantification of children’s play has been much more elusive. Skill
instruction, acquisition, and assessment, on the other hand, are easy to quantify and
measure. Test results report on student achievement and progress through the restricted
lens of demonstrated skills, and teachers are pressured to close any perceived gaps in learning by teaching students with these tests in mind.

Further, the Common Core standards were “backmapped” (Overstreet, 2018, p. 217), meaning that they were developed by first considering what skills and understandings students should have upon finishing their secondary education before considering what skills and understandings would be appropriate for middle and, finally, primary grades. Thus, the needs and capabilities of the youngest learners are sidelined and compromised by the very standards that guide instruction in early childhood settings.

Foremost among the ways these compromises have manifested themselves is that play has been pushed aside in favor of inauthentic, skill-based instruction. Play contributes to and even drives young children’s learning in a multitude of ways, from the advent of abstract thought in early childhood’s symbolic play and the development of impulse control in sociodramatic play with peers to the social, literary practices children appropriate and use to convey ideas, express identities, and “to get things done” (Wohlwend, 2011, p. 3). In the absence of teacher-mediated, school-based play, children are missing out on social, emotional, and cognitive learning opportunities.

Predictably, this is not happening in the same way for all children. It seems as though schools that serve children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to adhere more stringently to mandated or scripted curricula than schools attended by middle-class or affluent children, which may include more creative or authentic curricula. In her study of family life and educational experiences, Lareau (2011) found significant differences across social classes both in how parents engaged in and thought about child-rearing practices and in how children were taught and treated in schools. Schools
attended by the middle class and affluent children in her study seemed focused on academic achievement – which was promoted through in-school opportunities to engage in critical thinking tasks and meaningfully designed projects – while the schools attended by the poor and working class children seemed to be more focused on discipline and behavioral issues. Similarly, Grissom (2011) describes the high teacher turnover rate in schools serving large populations of economically disadvantaged children and how the difficulty principals have staffing these schools often means that the teachers are inexperienced and more likely to rely on scripted curricula and, I would suggest, authoritarian rather than collaborative styles of classroom management. If socioeconomic background determines the type or quality of education one receives, then play in schools, as Karen Wohlwend declared, can be considered the social justice issue of our time (Indiana University School of Education Discourse Analysis conference, May, 2013).

Research Questions and Design

I heard Wohlwend speak at a conference during my second semester as a doctoral student, and her words not only resonated with past readings and experiences but also hung with me, for several years to come, as I realized that in her galvanizing statement she linked three prongs of my professional interests into one interconnected triangulation. My interest in play was born in my graduate studies when I was first introduced to theorists such as Vygotsky (1978; 1986) and Dewey (1990/1932; 1990/1902; 1997/1932). Readings in my preliminary doctoral courses by researchers such as Rowe (2008), Vasquez (2004), and Wohlwend (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2011; 2013) herself drew the more explicit connections between classroom play, open-ended exploration of materials and
concepts, and literacy(ies) learning and enacting. Other readings in those classes, by authors such as Freire (2000/1970), Gee (2001; 2011), and Finn (2009) connected literacy to culture and issues of power. Now, with Wohlwend’s (2013) declaration, the issues of culture and power were brought back around to child’s play, and my thoughts have lingered within that triangle ever since.

![Figure 1.1](image)

**Questions**

The research questions that I developed over time as these ideas steeped within me are:

- What are the characteristics of a classroom in which play has been centered in the curriculum?
  - How is literacy learning a part of this environment?
- What effects does centering play have…
  - on the social practices in the classroom community?
  - on marginalized learners?
More broadly, how does play in school involve issues of equity and justice?

- Who gets to play?

**Design**

The design of this study was initially conceived of as an ethnographic study using grounded theory as a tool for analysis. The research site was a kindergarten classroom and, by extension, the hallways and play yard used by the children in a large, urban school district. The curriculum in this school was a recently-implemented educational model inspired by the Waldorf approach and informed by play, the arts, and the outdoors. Study participants included the lead teacher, her assistant, their class of twenty kindergarten children, the school principal, and one parent. Collected data included observational field notes, audio-recorded interviews with adult participants, school and district documents, and photographs of the classroom, play yard, and student work samples. Limitations stemming from permissions from the district and access to participants, as well emergent shifts in focus of data due to the story unfolding outside and pushing its way inside the classroom doors of my research site, led to a reconceptualization of the design, which evolved into a phenomenological intrinsic case study (Creswell, 2013) guided by the research questions listed above.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has significant implications at three levels: practical, theoretical, and policy. First, it addresses the practical issues pre-service teachers face as they learn about the importance of play in the development of children, how to recognize and facilitate a play/literacy nexus (Wohlwend, 2011) in their classrooms, and how to advocate for these
to their administrators and parents of their students. It also addresses practical issues faced by in-service teachers as they plan for, implement, mediate, and manage play scenarios as well as the play/literacy nexus in the curriculum in early childhood. Second, this study contributes to the synthesis and understanding of the interconnectedness of theories related to play, play and early literacy, and the ways societal and institutional inequities contribute to children’s educational experiences and opportunities. Finally, at the policy level, this study makes a strong case for the reconsideration of play-based curricula over skill-based instruction and assessment and for more equitable solutions to early childhood education that allow for all children to engage in thoughtful, intentional play at school.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Socioculturalism**

**Vygotsky.** This study is situated within the critical sociocultural perspective, and a full discussion of this perspective should begin with its predecessor, Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism. This theory asserts that the internalization of higher level thinking processes stems from external social interactions; for children, these interactions are often based in sociodramatic play and become, over the course of development, internalized, so that imagination and thought can be regarded as “play without action” (p. 93). Semiotic mediation is involved, too, and play itself as a sign system mediates children’s learning (Vygotsky; Goodman & Goodman, 1990). Further, Vygotsky introduced the “zone of proximal development” (p. 86), which refers to the ability of a child to engage in activities that are too challenging for independent
participation but which can be accessed with the mediation of an outside influence, such as an adult, a peer, or even a text.

**Moll.** Luis Moll built onto the theory of social constructivism to develop sociocultural theory (Tracey & Morrow, 2012), which asserts that social, cultural, and historical backgrounds have significant influences on learning as well. The implication for educators, then, is that these aspects of identity influence the ways students connect to curricula.

Moll and his colleagues also introduced another important concept they termed Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Their research revealed ways in which children and families participate, through their daily lives, in literacy events and acts that are not valued or reflected in the school setting, causing children to be cast as low-level literacy learners rather than permitted to bring their literacies to school. Marginalized students’ funds of knowledge are often unacknowledged at school (Moll et al., 1992). When students are relieved of their funds of knowledge, school becomes an isolated and isolating experience (Moll et al., 1992; Larson, 2006). Conversely, when they can enact their funds of knowledge in the school setting, school becomes a place of authentic engagement for them.

Sociocultural theory has been significant in the research field of education because few theories account for such an extensive range of mediators in literacy learning, and these span from the wide cultural view to the narrow personal view (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007).

**Critical Sociocultural Perspective**
Sociocultural theory and identity, agency, and power in learning. Recent scholars have criticized sociocultural theory for not fully interrogating the factors that affect the literacy learning of children, and have specifically focused in on issues of identity, agency, and power (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Identity refers to a stable, internal state of being, and people enact multiple identities depending on contexts and roles (Lewis et al., Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010; Gee, 2011). Identities are developed and influenced by participation in discourse communities (Gee, 2011) and communities of practice (Rogers & Fuller, 2007). These are groups where people have common understandings, agendas, or backgrounds, and participation in these affects the ways people connect to other experiences, which in turn affects ways of learning. Learning itself can be considered as a series of shifts in identity, mediated by social, cultural, historical, and personal backgrounds (Gee; Moje & Lewis, 2007). Upon entering a new community of practice, identities become unstable as one makes connections and explores which existing or new identities will be enacted or suppressed in the new context (Rogers & Fuller, 2007).

Another important concept is agency, the strategic making and remaking of one’s own self (Moje & Lewis, 2007) and the positioning of one’s self for new ways of being (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Agency is the way one uses one’s identity or identities to control one’s own positioning in a group. People—including children—want to be in control of how they act and are viewed among others; it can be debilitating when someone else is casting one’s identity for them. Further, interest and motivation to participate in a group is heightened when people feel they have agency over themselves. People learn best when they are in control of what they are learning (Goodman &
Goodman, 1990); children learn best when they are engaged in meaningful, authentic activities (Dewey 1938/1997; 1932/1990).

Finally, power is involved. Power is produced as a result of relationships and interactions (Moje & Lewis, 2007), and it is sustained by micropractices of power. These micropractices can be enacted or disrupted in schools regarding how families are involved, what the content of the curricula is, and how interactions between children are negotiated with teachers; learners can be empowered or disempowered as a result of the school communities of practice in which they engage.

A critical sociocultural perspective. To address the fact that the sociocultural perspective attempts to take into account the factors that influence learning in students’ lives but fails to consider identity, agency, and power, Lewis, Enciso, & Moje (2007) propose a critical sociocultural perspective. Additionally, they argue, including the lenses of identity, agency, and power gives researchers a more rigorous way of studying literacy learning, which in turn provides the teaching community with new insights of how teachers can affect student learning in the classroom. These insights give practitioners clearer paths to valuing what students know and including every student in their own learning.

Conclusion, and Subsequent Chapters

In this introductory chapter, I describe the informal and formal experiences with children that led me to an interest in play, as well as some of the ways play functions in child development and learning. I contextualize my study with a description of the current climate regarding educational policies and rationalize the study by describing the issues of inequity surrounding their implementation. I provide my interconnected and
triangulated research topics along with my corresponding research questions. Finally, I ground my study within the theoretical homes of social constructivism and socioculturalism, and take up the expanded version of these, critical socioculturalism, which allows researchers to use the added lenses of identity, agency, and power in examining child development and learning.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

In Chapter Two, I will review the literature relevant to childhood sociodramatic play, literacy(ies) learning and instruction, and the institutional and societal reproduction of power in schooling. This study is grounded within Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism (Tracy & Morrow, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978), which holds that people learn by creating meaning from their own experiences, and Moll’s theory of socioculturalism (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), which asserts that development and learning are dependent on the cultural situation of the individual. Additionally, I take up the critical sociocultural perspective to include issues of identity, agency, and power.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

In Chapter Three, I will describe my study’s setting and participants, my methods of data collection and analysis, as well as issues I encountered while conducting my study that led me to shift the design from what was originally conceived of as an ethnographic study with grounded theory methods to a phenomenological case study.

Chapter Four: Findings

In Chapter Four, I detail the findings from the study, including a thick description of Jenni’s classroom, her teaching practices, and her own words about her experiences at Marion Elementary. I use the Jacaranda Model curriculum proposal as a primary source
to investigate and interrogate the ways it was undermined and, ultimately, pulled from Marion. Other participants, including the principal, Ms. Bond, and the parent, Carrie, as well as their thoughts about and experiences with play and literacy in the curriculum are described based on the content of our interviews. Finally, the threads of social justice and issues of equity that emerged, interwoven, throughout the sections on each participant are depicted and described.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In Chapter Five, I highlight key findings from Chapter Four. I tie those key findings to the literature and describe the ways they are consistent with or run counter to the existing literature. I discuss the limitations of the research, problems that arose, and how I handled these as a researcher. I describe implications of the research on three levels—practical, theoretical, and policy—and how teachers, administrators, parents and students are affected. Finally, I make recommendations based on my work, suggest directions for future research, and conclude with a final statement.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I first historically contextualize the topic of instructional practices in early childhood and government policy. Next, I provide definitions to terms important for this review, including play, literacies, identity, agency, power, and discourse. I then review existing research literature on play and literacy and the documented interrelatedness of the two. I also review the literature on inequities in education and on critical and powerful literacy. Finally, within each of these topics, I write about the issues of identity, agency, and power that are interwoven throughout.

History

Yetta Goodman (2011) notes in her retrospective article on literacy practices and policies over the course of her career that a heightened reliance on testing as a measure of achievement perpetuates the transmission model of instruction and thus pushes play to the periphery of early childhood education; this, she explains, has been happening since the 1950s. The dichotomy between research and policy is documented by other researchers (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010; Wohlwend, 2008b, 2013; Bergen, 2009; Overstreet, 2018; Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2004) as well, highlighting a central issue in the challenges of early literacy teaching: “government accountability
mandates for standardized testing and uniform teaching leave little time for the messy wonder that regularly occurs during child-directed play and exploration – in effect, driving play out of classrooms in favor of teacher directed skills instruction” (Wohlwend, 2008b, p. 127). These observations beg a question to be explored later in this review: if play were embraced, rather than dismissed, in early childhood classrooms, in what ways could it support learners, particularly those whose home discourses are in tension with those of the school, and who may in fact be more likely to attend schools in which play has been pushed away in favor of standards-based instruction (Finn, 2009)?

Definitions

Play

This review will depend on a Vygotskian view, in which play is a “leading factor in development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 101). Play is infamously difficult to define (Eberle, 2014; Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013); Sutton-Smith’s (1997) oft-cited volume on play takes up the issue of ambiguity in the very title of the book. Many researchers rely on lists of attributes that must be present in order for the scenario to be deemed play. For instance, Eberle proposes six basic elements of play: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise; after quantifying the discussion with these attributes, however, he touches on the importance and real relevance of the quality of play: “to bring a quantitative approach to a qualitative task would be to miss the point badly” (p. 217). Elkonin (2005) introduces levels of play, and he suggests that play is the recreation of action – but then he qualifies this by stating that not all recreation of action is play. Paley (2004) takes a more general, less definitive view and considers play to be the work of children. In attempting to articulate a
definition, Vygotsky himself writes a great deal on what play is not. Play can be characterized, if not defined, as a means through which children express themselves and their desires and motives, reflect on the world around them, and make meaning of their experiences.

Bakhtin (1981) hints at forms of play that are less relevant to the understanding of learning and development but rather purposeful as a means of individual expression and subversion of authority. Cohen (2011) reports that five hallmarks of play identified by Sutton-Smith (2001) correspond to Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, wherein parody was celebrated and the solemn submission to church authority was turned on its head during feast days. The play of carnival is reminiscent of the English tradition of pantomime as well as the double-voiced trickster characters Esu and the Signifying Monkey of African and African-American folklore (Gates, 1988). In these traditions, characters in stories or people living their lives find space “to assume new identities and to overcome fear—to free themselves from the pressures of those with power” (Cohen, p. 183); I would argue, additionally, that when new identities are assumed, “real” identities are buried or disguised; an agentive act has taken place. Children also create and assume new or appropriated identities in their play, which can also often be the space for them to explore, process, and assume positions of power in their lives.

**Literacies**

Literacy has a range of definitions, and for the purposes here it is based in social language practices, including reading and writing. Rowe (2008) argues for an “expanded view” (p. 68) in her study of young preschoolers’ writing understandings. Additionally, she considers “literacy as a social practice that is local, positioned, and cultural” (p. 69).
Gee (2001) furthers the concept of language as directly tied to the user: “language is not about conveying neutral or objective information; rather it is about communicating perspectives on experience and action in the world, often in contrast to alternative and competing perspectives” (p. 716). Language, then, involves one’s identity, and literacy can be seen as a means for communicating one’s identity.

Finn (2009) describes “levels of literacy” (p. 124): performative, the most basic level, which involves the ability to decode words in print and write informal sentences; functional, the level that would allow an average individual to function in day-to-day life, reading newspapers and filling out basic forms; informational, which allows an individual to read, understand, and recall informative texts; and powerful, “…the literacy of a persons who are conscious of their own power and self interest…the literacy of negotiation.” Powerful literacy involves the ability to act with agency in one’s cultural and situational environment.

Another aspect to the definition of literacy as it applies to this review is what is referred to as “new literacies” (Wohlwend, 2008a; Wohlwend, 2008b; Wohlwend, 2011; Wohlwend, 2013; Gee, 2001; Finn, 2009; Larson, 2006; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2004; Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin, Powell, & Wohlwend, 2012). These “expand the definitions of literacy and texts from reading and writing print bounded by a page of paper to include gaming, blogging, podcasting, text messaging, and other ways of digitally participating in vast social networks” (Wohlwend, 2008b, p. 127). Wohlwend’s (2008a) study of literacy play in one kindergarten setting found that the broader notions of new literacies challenge the current trends in education policy that adhere strictly to standards and outcomes; perhaps, as she suggests, these newer understandings will
influence policy-makers to rethink their goals and expectations of young learners and the literacy structures of early childhood classrooms.

For the purposes of this review and this study, I define *literacies* as semiotic social practices: using signs systems for communication.

**Identity**

Identity is being (Gee, 2011), and one’s ability to project or enact one’s identity is intimately tied to language use (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Wohlwend, 2011). People embody multiple identities, which are suppressed or constrained, enacted or revealed, either passively or actively, depending on the social and situational context. Some scholars (Moje & Lewis, 2007; Freire, 2000/1970) suggest that learning itself “can be conceptualized as shifts in identity” (Moje & Lewis, p. 19), and that we enact new or developing identities as we integrate new information or ways of knowing. Identities, though shaped by external factors such as culture, history, experience, or interactions, are deeply personal.

**Agency**

Agency has to do with one’s ability to assert or suppress one’s identities in given contexts, and with one’s ability to negotiate or control the ways in which this assertion or suppression occurs. Some learning environments allow for student agency, and some do not: consider Freire’s (2000/1970) banking model of instruction, wherein students are receptacles for the narrations of the teacher, which are likely disconnected from the students’ experiences and interests. This model of education excludes the individual and stands in direct opposition to a model of inquiry, such as what Dewey (1990/1902) describes and in which children have the agency to identify topics and take up studies.
that connect to their experiences and interests. Education that allows for agentive students provides purposeful, authentic learning experiences in which they are intrinsically and personally motivated.

**Power and Inequity**

I will not use this section to define power and inequality per se, but rather to open the discussion to the fact that power and inequity are interlaced within our societal and institutional constructs, including the educational system, at all levels. Freire (2000/1970) asserts that cultural power and oppression amount to dehumanization, a phenomenon that can only be righted through liberation by oppressed people recognizing their status and acting against it. Similarly, Shor (1992) argues that critical consciousness, including power awareness, is required for the transformative business of changing society. Bourdieu (2000) sees power as productive, and societal institutions like the educational system reproduce “all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes” (p. 57). Finn (2009) felt he was a part of that reproduction when he taught working class high school students, who “expected people in authority to be authoritarian” (p. 3), in a style much akin to Freire’s banking model. Even young children wield power amongst their peers in the classroom setting, creating exclusionary or inclusionary spaces during their work and play (Wohlwend, 2011).

Gee (2001) argues that the reconceptualization of literacy to include new literacies—digital and otherwise—is necessary for discussing and addressing “issues of access and equity in schools and workplaces” (p. 174); Finn (2009) frames his argument
around control and negotiation in defending this broad inclusion of new and, I would argue, democratic means of communication.

**Discourse**

In the context of this dissertation, discourse refers to one’s community’s way of individual expression, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Finn, 2009); in short, identity kits (Gee, 2001, p. 719). In Gee’s article situating reading within a broader context of language and culture, he goes on to describe how one individual can be a part of multiple discourses depending on his or her community and experiences. Gee uses a capital D to distinguish this specific definition of the word from the simpler definition of language in use; I will use a lowercase d to maintain consistency with other authors and because this review only concerns this one complex definition of the word. Further, these discourses can be in alignment with one another, such as when one’s home discourse and school discourse embody the same goals, values, and implicit understandings, or in tension with one another, such as when one’s home discourse involves values or practices opposed to the values or practices of one’s workplace or school. Finally, just as language use is a component in conveying identity, language is central to the discourse practices in which one engages. Language meaning can be dependent on the discursive context:

> When we seek to understand a word, what matters is not the direct meaning the word gives to objects and emotions…what matters is rather the actual and always self-interested *use* to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker’s position and by the concrete situation. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 401)

Similarly, literacies are situated in a discursive context, and meaning-making is dependent on the nature of these.

**Review of Literature**
Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism asserts that children construct meaning in their lives through play and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Moll’s (Tracy & Morrow, 2012) theory of socioculturalism captures the significance of social, cultural, and historical influences on development, and critical socioculturalism (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) takes into account the ways in which identity, agency, and power further influence child development and learning.

**Social and Cognitive Development in Play**

Play gives children opportunities to work through confusing or challenging texts—the narratives of their own lives, perhaps, or content and concepts they encounter as early scholars. In her book about the practice of storytelling, Paley (1999) describes the ways her students listen to and tell stories that they then reenact over and over with particular empathetic attention paid to the emotional motives of the characters or themselves. Bergen (2009), on the other hand, writes in her article about future mathematicians and scientists about the value of play in school for the ways it enhances student adaptability and creative development, both of which are important in the fields of math and sciences. The meaning-making children do in regards to their own experiences incorporates emotion and thought, which are interconnected and not separate developmental processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Children’s social-emotional development and cognitive development are parts of the same processes involved in play interactions. The meaning children make, then, is dependent on the experiences they have, which continue to expand. However, Vygotskian scholars seem to agree that play is not simply a reflection of the child’s previous experiences but rather essential activity for the “development of a ‘future child’” (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). As Overstreet (2018)
explains in her article about the need for play at all educational levels, in appropriating and reimagining the discourses of others, in viewing the world through the lens of another’s perspective, children “discover their own voices” (p. 218). A child’s identity is forged through engagement in sociodramatic play. Additionally, identities forged are agentive ones: “When children are enabled to see that they are playing a role and can easily substitute another role in its place, they are greatly relieved. They control the character; the character does not control them” (Paley, 2004, p. 101).

Vygotsky (1978) asserts the ways in which engagement in the sign system of sociodramatic play promotes children’s ability to engage in symbolic thought, which, he argues, is a prerequisite for the use of the sign systems related to language, specifically written language. Further, the use of sign systems indicates internally-oriented activity; sign systems, such as play, reading, and writing, are related to the development of [internal] identity. Wohlwend (2011) found that the kindergarten children in her study of play and literacy practices took up situated identities according to their actions which were mediated by the materials and work spaces provided in the classroom: “different identities were available to a child drawing pictures at the writing table, to a child playing with telephones in the housekeeping corner, and to a child animating a princess doll in a pink and lavender dollhouse” (p. 15). The children she observed also enacted their sedimented identities: these sometimes disparate aspects of identity reflect the layers of one’s social, cultural, and historical funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In his study of the development of peer culture amongst young children, Corsaro (1985) expands the notion of individual identity and asserts that in play, children imitate and appropriate the societal constructs in which they exist to develop a
group identity, which he argues is maintained throughout childhood. This would seem to include the structures of power and inequity of which we are all a part.

According to Vygotsky (1978), as children develop, their play demonstrates a growing ability to resist urges and control impulses “because an inherent relationship exists between the roles children play and the rules they need to follow when playing these roles” (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). In their growing ability to engage in behaviors with intentionality, children demonstrate their higher mental function and, thus, development (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Language is important in this process because of its interpersonal and intrapersonal uses: language is a communicative device in social interactions, and in young children, external thought (i.e., children narrating their way through a task) it is also a mechanism used to control one’s own thought and action (Vygotsky). This regulatory self-control is, I would argue, the precursor to children becoming agentive selves. Similarly, children in play can disrupt or maintain social norms and expectations with intentionality and purpose (Cohen, 2011). Agency requires some level of self-awareness, and children achieve this awareness as well as practice acting and negotiating through their sociodramatic play.

Another important concept in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism is the zone of proximal development. This refers to the ability of a child to engage in activities that are too challenging for independent engagement but which can be accessed with the mediation of an outside influence, such as an adult, a more competent peer, or even a text. Thus, social interaction fuels learning by providing an endless combination of new experiences for meaning-making, and peer interaction is also necessary in
instances where a child is operating within his or her zone of proximal development but needs support for full engagement (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Wohlwend, 2011).

In practice, this theory is demonstrated by the literature in this review. Paley (1999; 2004) and her students drive the learning of one another through play, narrative, and discussion. In Rowe’s (2008) study of preschoolers’ writing, the teachers model and demonstrate the act of writing to engage their young students. Wohlwend (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2011) discusses at length the ways in which peer interaction amongst kindergarten students is the fundamental drive in her study’s classroom toward engaging in literacy activities. It is important to note that while literacy is central in these examples, the previous discussion demonstrates that a broader learning is gleaned from play. Play with peers involves assertion, planning, negotiation, and language use, among other skills, and it is through the execution of these that children engage in social and cognitive learning.

Finally, while spontaneous play in children may be local and temporary, the learning effects are not. As we have seen, children create meaning from new experiences by applying the lessons learned from previous experiences; all are interrelated in terms of the child’s understanding of the world. Under the conditions of experimentation and play, meaning is generated by the individual child that can contribute to growth in self-awareness, self-regulation, and higher levels of cognition; behavior, interaction, and cognition are all affected (Vygotsky, 1978, Roskos & Christie, 2001). Children bring yesterday’s dramatic play outcomes with them to today’s play scenarios. Widen the lens, and we see that the discourses of which children are a part, laden with power and inherent inequities, inform their play and meaning-making. Meaning is not simply located in the play of a child, but in the life of a child.
Literacies in Early Childhood

Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, and Owociki (2004) assert the transactional perspective on early literacy, wherein processes of meaning-making occur around texts and both the text and the text producer/consumer (author/reader) are changed as a result. Central also to this perspective is Goodman and Goodman’s (1990) idea of language as a dual means of expression and communication, that language learning involves a tension between the personal and the societal, which manifests as a tension between the inventions of the individual and the conventions of the society. These opposing forces operate in an integrated way in literacy development. Children have a need for expression that will be received by others around them, and they personally invent the ways in which they express themselves. Babies babble each in their own unique way, toddlers scribble on paper with colored crayons of their own choosing, and children entering school use pictures, letter-like marks, letters, and invented spelling to communicate their thoughts on paper. Concurrent with these inventions, social conventions of language use and literacies begin to be meaningful, and appropriated, as well. Babies’ babble take on the intonations and turn-taking of conversation with their caregivers, toddlers stuff their scribbled notes into envelopes to be sent away, and children experiment with the literacy practices they observe in their daily lives, such as making spaces between words in writing and using pictures to retell a story to stuffed animals.

In his discussion of the practical implications of literacy instruction, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that “the teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something” (p. 117) beyond the arbitrary assignments meted out by the teacher. Otherwise, he states, students become bored and stifled and, I would
continue, are unable to realize or express their identities as readers and writers. Dewey (1990/1932) recognizes the need for meaningful academic practices as a cornerstone of Progressive education: “The pupil must learn what has meaning, what enlarges his horizon, instead of mere trivialities” (p. 78). Dewey also asserts that it is the pupil, the child, who decides what is meaningful and thus what should be explored in the course of study. He describes a balance that must be struck in the school setting: a child’s learning must stem from her own experiences rather than the experiences of others that might be presented in books or lectures. On the other hand, a child ought not to be expected to “evolve a universe out of his own mere mind” (Dewey, 1990/1902, p. 196). As echoed by Goodman and Goodman (1990), children should be exposed to conventions and given time and space for inventions in their school-based early literacy learning.

Many contemporary researchers document, recognize, and examine the ways in which children’s active literacies and discourses are left out of the schooling agenda in favor of more isolated and reductive methods of literacy instruction (Freire, 2012/1970; Finn, 2009; Gee, Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Whitmore, Martens, Goodman, & Owocki, 2004; Wohlwend, 2011; Larson, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). Any child will have difficulty finding meaning and, therefore, motivation, in a curriculum that excludes their own active forms of literacy participation. Children from backgrounds already marginalized from the mainstream, dominant society, whose familial, social, cultural, and historical funds of knowledge are also disregarded or even devalued by the school, lose the ability to forge a school identity and participate in agentive learning, and the often insurmountable burden of engagement is placed on these children (Finn, 2009).
In her ethnographic study of child-rearing practices in families from different socioeconomic backgrounds, Larson (2006) goes so far as to suggest that schools risk their very relevancy by excluding new literacies and relying on isolated skills instruction. She asserts that stifling children’s language and literacies practices risks disrupting their developing identities, and she proposes the use of literacies assessments that examine and value how children put their practices into meaningful use. Finn (2009) documents the academic ramifications that instructional practices can have on students, describing how heightened and continual reliance on isolated skills, such as phonics instruction, can lead to a persistent decline in reading ability and engagement. Although Dewey (1990/1902) and Vygotsky (1978) made their assertions about meaningful and relevant instruction with all children in mind, Larson and other critical theorists and practitioners (Freire, 1970; Vasquez, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Janks, 2014; Gee, 2001) insist on the necessity that schools connect content and learning in meaningful ways to students’ lives—whatever those lived experiences might be.

Play and Literacy

Vygotsky (1978) identifies a distinct connection between language (a root of literacy) and action in early childhood: that action begets language and dialogue. Along with this he presents the idea that early scribbles and drawings are actually gestures, fixed on the page, and that later, with intentionality, comes more deliberate and communicative marks. Drawing and play, he asserts, are both supported by tools (i.e., writing materials and playthings) and gestures in early stages of development and later both become independent sign systems. Wohlwend (2011) theorizes play as a literacy, and identifies her research site, a kindergarten classroom, as a community of practice where literate
identities are enacted around literacy events. The social component becomes the crux of these events as children seek out desired playmates, negotiate access by including or excluding others, and generally take part in the culture of the classroom the teacher has established.

The interrelatedness of play and literacy in young children has both positive and negative implications. In settings where play’s role is recognized as a central one in the social and cognitive development of children, it is incorporated into the daily learning activities and, as the research suggests, strengthens children’s abilities in play and in literacies acquisition (Wohlwend, 2008a, 2011; Christie & Roskos, 2009; Larson, 2006). On the other hand, in the many settings where play is being pushed aside for standards-based instruction, children’s play and learning are both compromised (Christie & Roskos, 2006). Where play suffers, literacy learning suffers.

In Wohlwend’s (2009) study of literacy learning in a kindergarten classroom, she explains: “Nexus are intersections where practices link and strengthen each other; in the playing/writing nexus, children’s play enhances their writing and their writing enhances their play” (p. 68). Language practices arise out of play experiences that involve social interaction with peers and teachers, and there is evidence of children’s play supporting their literacy growth. Rowe’s (2008) study of the writing of very young children “focused on describing how children’s literacy knowledge is socially negotiated and performed with others as they participate in classroom writing events” (p. 92); this indicates that their learning about writing was interdependent on the social dynamic present in the classroom. Additionally, Rowe points out that literacy behaviors reflect the
child’s own constructed knowledge of reading and writing, and that meaning in these behaviors precedes conventionality.

Literacy experiences support play, too; characters and concepts from traditional children’s literature drive play and social interactions. Paley (1999, 2004) utilizes the stories told by herself and her students particularly as vehicles for role-play and discussion; her students become as familiar with the struggles and successes of the fantasy characters they have co-constructed as they are with their actual peers.

**Multimodal literacies.** Children also draw from the multimodal literacies of popular culture as they align to their school literacies to inform their play; this can depend on the extent to which teachers invite or permit literacies from outside the school. As Larson (2006) writes, “classroom walls are breached and students learn in more complex ways” (p. 322) when they can bring in their own literacy practices and also take up new ones. Wohlwend (2009) explores the ways in which identity and gender messages gleaned from fairy tales inform and challenge roles children embrace in sociodramatic play. Vasquez (2004) draws from critical theory in her work with young children, who initiate investigations as a result of their own interests in the world around them. For instance, when the children bring in artifacts of their peer culture, such as collectable toys from a fast-food restaurant, Vasquez helps them see these as cultural texts that must be investigated, critiqued, and acted upon.

**Critical literacy.** Just as Dewey (1990/1932) and Vygotsky (1978) emphasize that learning should be meaningful and relevant to the student, so Freire (1970), in asserting his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that the meaning and learning should come directly from the oppressed people. In critical literacy, “the oppressed must
confront reality critically” (p. 52); choice in what issues to take up, to understand, to resolve, is implicit, and these arise from the social, cultural, and political issues affecting the participants. Critical literacies are, by their very nature, meaningful, and students engaged in critical literacy can identify connections to issues, construct meaning from available texts, and act on their findings (Janks, 2014) regardless of their mastery of the isolated skills for which standards-based instruction tests.

**Role of the teacher.** In this discussion of the play/literacy nexus in early childhood, the role of the adult teacher cannot be understated. Teachers should guide and challenge students’ thinking to facilitate meaningful play experiences (Vygotsky, 1978), and in order to do so successfully they need a handle on the nature of children’s thoughts and ideas. Paley (2004) goes beyond watching and listening to her students; she documents their language and literacies so she, the teacher, can examine their curriculum. Similarly, Vasquez (2004) describes at length the time and mental commitment to preparation and reflection that is required of her to conduct critical explorations with her young students. The kindergarten at the heart of Wohlwend’s (2011) study operated, under the direction of the teacher, as an “early literacy apprenticeship where children were invited into literacy through mediated encounters with print” (p. 23). Shor (1992) delineates the differences between “teacher talk” in a traditional, transmission model classroom and “dialogue,” which is initiated by the teacher but in which students can intervene; he argues that “balancing the teacher’s authority and the students’ input is the key to making the process both critical and democratic” (p. 85). Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) assert that the burden is on the teacher to act as a bridge between the school discourse and the discourses students bring with them to school. Finn (2009)
describes reproducing, as a teacher, systems of power and authority and later revising his
stance as an educator to be more inclusive of and more collaborative with his students.

Accessing Literacies and Discourses

Do children whose home discourse is in tension with that of the school play
“school?” If so, do they use this time-honored play scenario to liberate themselves from
a discourse not their own, where values and expectations do not align with those of the
adults in their lives at home? Or does this play reflect an attempt for understanding or
belonging? Current research does not directly address these questions as they apply to
young children, but an examination of existing literature does indicate the possibility.

Research suggests that there are play- and language- similarities in children
entering school across geographic and cultural locations. Paley (1999) engages children
in narrative play throughout her professional travels. Gee (2001) notes that children from
high and low socioeconomic backgrounds possess keen language abilities: “The vast
majority of children enter school with large vocabularies, complex grammar, and deep
understandings of experiences and stories” (p. 724). Where and why, then, to children’s
school experiences diverge so neatly down socioeconomic lines?

Readings included in this review indicate differences across communities that are
so profound they cannot be masked by the similarities recognized in children from
different backgrounds. Heath (1983) describes differences in communities of varying
socioeconomic statuses according to language use, and Finn (2009) comments that people
from poor and working class backgrounds are more likely to feel powerless, to feel
pressure to conform, to be unused to using explicit language, and to be unused to
recognizing opportunities in daily life for negotiating one’s own position. In contrast, he
finds that people from middle-class and affluent backgrounds recognize their own potential to change one’s own circumstance, particularly through the power of negotiation. Lareau (2011) describes ways in which out-of-school child-rearing practices and in-school instructional and management practices foster these differences in identity and feelings of agency.

As Lareau (2011) suggests, these differences are reflected in school inequities. Wohlwend (2008b) found in her study of kindergarten literacy learning that despite the teacher’s best efforts to curb inequity and to promote equal access (e.g., by interfering in social interactions in which she recognized exclusion, by inviting children’s families to be a part of classroom learning, and by making inclusion a part of explicit classroom discussion) for all her students, the children brought with them the larger social constructs of the peer culture, the school culture, and the discourses of their own communities, some of which did and some of which did not align overtly with commonly-considered school goals. More to the point, Finn (2009) and Lareau (2011) identify specific ways that the home discourse of middle-class and affluent students directly relates in terms of attitudes, values, and negotiation skills to that of the school, and that the home discourses of poor and working-class students is in direct conflict, in those same areas of attitudes, values, and negotiation skills, with that of the school. Furthermore, although Wohlwend’s (2011) study focuses in on, among many other features, the micropractices of power and control taken up by the children and teacher in regards to literacies and play, and the author repeatedly laments the fact that the access to the play/literacy nexus these children have is increasingly rare across schooling experiences, there is a significant gap in the literature specific to instructional practices in
early childhood settings according to the language practices and socioeconomic backgrounds of students.

If, as research suggests, the root of the differences between children entering and attending school is language-based and tied to the ways in which their home discourses align or are in tension with that of the school, then we as educators need to find ways to provide children from poor and working-class backgrounds access to the school discourse, and this begs an examination of language use. Consistent with Vygotsky and the social constructivist theory is Gee’s (2001) observation that “meaning in language is tied to people’s experiences of situated action in the material and social world” (p. 715). This suggests that with expanded [social] experiences one’s language experiences would expand as well. How might play in the school setting contribute to the expansion of children’s language experiences in ways that help them traverse discourses more fluidly and agentively?

Gee (2001) and Finn (2009) draw distinctions between acquiring a discourse and learning one. According to them, acquiring a discourse is what happens quite naturally as a result of living within one. Learning a discourse, however, particularly one that is in conflict or opposition to one’s previous discursive experiences, involves being consciously aware of one’s current values and beliefs as well as those of the new discourse. This same awareness and confrontation of one’s lived reality is required in conducting critical literacy (Freire, 2000/1970). In addition to the need to be consciously aware of one’s own discourse and the new one, there is also the need for inclusion in the new discourse as well as the need for motivation to learn the new discourse (Finn, 2009).
The nuances related to inclusion in a school discourse that Finn describes are worth citing in full:

[The students learning a new discourse] need to be introduced into and made to feel welcome in a community where explicit language makes sense, where it’s necessary—a community where nonconformity is tolerated and even encouraged, where authority is exercised collaboratively, and where students do not feel powerless, where they have choices regarding the topics they will study and the materials they will use and where they are given freedom to work with others (preferably from backgrounds different from their own) and to move around the room. Such classrooms make negotiation possible and even necessary. (p. 91)

This description, with its emphasis on inclusion, assertion, language experience, choice, and movement, is reminiscent of classic early childhood classrooms. Although Finn focuses more on the needs of older students in his discussion, the qualities of the desired classroom atmosphere are similar to the qualities described by Wohlwend (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2011), for instance, in her studies of literacy practices in a kindergarten setting. Similar, too, is Finn’s identified need for motivation to Dewey’s (1990/1932) and Vygotsky’s assertions that learning be meaningful and relevant to draw in student interest. It seems that the characteristics of early childhood classrooms that value play and social interaction could be used as a paradigm not only in sustaining the play/literacy nexus that research indicates is so important but in also extending that nexus, in the form of critical and multimodal literacies to even older students.

Wohlwend (2008a; 2008b) discusses the importance of the classroom becoming a place where cultures can blend, particularly the peer culture with the culture of the school (Corsaro, 1985). Paley (2004) and Vasquez (2004) create just such environments for their students by valuing the contributions of their thoughts, ideas, and insights in the daily classroom discourses, by accepting and learning about the differences among the people in their classes, including their parents and adult caregivers, and by actively
creating spaces for children who demonstrate a need to access the culture or discourse of the school. Rowe (2008) suggests a direction for future research that seemingly has yet to be explored: a deeper understanding of the social contracts—“shared cultural knowledge that individuals draw on to produce and use written texts in culturally appropriate ways” (p. 66)—enacted in school and home discourse settings, how these compare and contrast, and how they are applicable to the lives of learners.

Schooling as Reproduction, Control, and Discipline

Bourdieu (2002) writes that rather than disrupting societal inequities, the education system affirms them in insidious and often invisible ways. “…The educational system…[contributes] to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and [conceals], by an apparently neutral attitude, the fact that it fills this function” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 57). This happens at least in part as a result of pedagogic action, wherein people of dominant classes can find success in a curriculum that values their own sets of cultural practices and, conversely, people with differing cultural practices fail because they are unable to connect with the schooling experience. This is “often unbeknownst to those responsible for it and to those who are subjected to it” (p. 58), meaning that teachers, administrators, students, and parents who participate in the schooling system contribute to the maintenance of the status quo simply through their participation, whether or not they are benefiting from that system. As Marsh (2006) highlights, “this domination constitutes a form of violence on the values and social practices of other groups—not physical violence but symbolic violence” (p. 163). Thus, schools, which are often conceptualized as democratizing institutions, actually reproduce the inequities that are already ubiquitous in society and its institutions.
Foucault (1995/1975) asserts that there are specific school practices that transmit power and control. In so doing, he argues, schools operate as institutions of control. First, he identifies a patronizing philosophical underpinning of the education system, which is that it reproduces the values and practices of the dominant class with the inherent assumption that they are morally and culturally better than the values and practices of other classes in society. As he writes, “those poor who were unable to bring up their children” (p. 210) were unable to do so properly because their cultural values were considered to be deficient by the dominant class. This echoes the pedagogic violence to which Bourdieu refers, and suggests that the dominant class imposes its curriculum from a perceived moral high ground and would not permit a school pedagogy emergent from people of lower socioeconomic status.

Foucault (1995/1975) writes extensively about ways that other constructs, particularly in the field of education, are used to exert control within the schooling system. He compares the system to a machine and writes, “Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine” (p. 202). This recalls the depersonalization of teachers and the common use of scripted curricula, which do not take into account student interest or prior knowledge, and do not give teachers an opportunity to exercise their professional competence. Pedagogic violence is committed when no one is there to critique the curriculum.

Another educational practice Foucault (1995/1975) calls into question is testing, which he calls a “constantly repeated ritual of power” (p. 186). Testing has become such a high-stakes phenomenon in today’s schooling system that, rather than being a means of measuring student knowledge or progress, it has become the driving force behind
instruction so that children are taught in a way to promote testing success instead of
taught to promote critical thinking, creativity, or fortitude. Children’s educational paths
are determined by their performance on tests, and this heightened significance of testing
permits the dominant class’s operation of the educational system as a way to exert further
control over students.

Disciplinary practices are also connected to control in the educational system.
both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the
disciplinary power” (p. 175). People, and children, are more easily monitored—
controlled—when they are arranged in physically orderly ways. Children in desks are
easier to contain and watch than they are when they are engaged around a classroom in
activities of their own choosing or design. Additionally, teachers sometimes delegate this
power of surveillance by assigning students to jobs, such as hall monitor, wherein they
are required to monitor the behavior of their own peers as proxy for their teachers.

Societal institutions, including the educational system, reproduce power in ways
that are not immediately apparent. This power can be in regards to perceived cultural
superiority, to means of exerting cultural and social control, and to aspects of discipline.
The ways that power is transferred in seemingly neutral ways should be interrogated and
monitored by people involved in education, including students, families, teachers, and
administrators. Failure to do so contributes to the maintenance of the inequities of the
status quo.

**Conclusion**
As government policies continue to embrace accountability standards and skill-based instruction in schools, defenders of play in early childhood settings have fewer opportunities to allow children to engage in this important activity, and even fewer opportunities to enact instructional practices that support the play/literacy nexus. This review of literature in the field has explored the theories of social constructivism, socioculturalism, and critical socioculturalism, as well as the transactional view of early literacy and its corresponding features of invention and convention. The role of play in social and cognitive development as well as the interrelatedness early literacy with theories of play has been explored. Literature about social and cultural discourses has been introduced, and through an application of critical literacy theory, this review has established a connection between the characteristics of play, the value of multimodal literacies, and the ways in which these combine to better include and engage all learners in an introduction to the school discourse, particularly for children whose home discourse may be in conflict with that of the school. Finally, an examination of theories regarding the transmission of power and cultural dominance through the system of education has suggested the ways in which individual students and their families are be vulnerable in the face of the institution of education and ways that schooling practices have the potential to maintain or disrupt the inequities this transmission creates.

With these key understandings in mind, I propose a research study that examines the nature of children’s play in the early childhood public school setting, argues for a broader interpretation and acceptance of the literacies children bring to school, and establishes the connections between societal and institutional inequities faced by many families and the educational opportunities with which they are left.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe my research methodology for the study I conducted. I sought to observe and explore the characteristics of a public kindergarten classroom where the curriculum centered around children’s opportunities for sociodramatic play, and I also sought to understand more about the effects play has on a classroom community and the literacy learning of the children who comprise it, as well as the thoughts of the adults involved, such as the teacher, the principal of the school, and parents of students. I describe the setting of my study and how I came to enter it, the participants I recruited, and my data collection methods and analysis procedures. There were issues I encountered that are specific to research with children, and challenges I experienced during the data collection phase of the study, starting with the limitations placed on my intended data collection methods by the school district’s Institutional Review Board and culminating with the eventual termination of the curricular model I sought to study. Some of these challenges later led to a reconceptualization of the study design, which I will also describe.

The purpose of the study was to analyze and theorize what happens to the literacy development of kindergarteners when the curriculum and the philosophy of the classroom teacher center around open-ended sociodramatic play. This study explores issues of
socioeconomic status and equity in schooling, and I sought to understand more about the effects centering play has on children, teachers, families, and schools. The specific questions I address are:

- What are the characteristics of a classroom in which play has been centered in the curriculum?
  - How is literacy learning a part of this environment?
- What effects does centering play have…
  - on the social practices in the classroom community?
  - on marginalized learners?
- More broadly, how does play in school involve issues of equity and justice?
  - Who gets to play?

Research methods and analysis focus on issues particular to conducting research with children. This study, situated in a public kindergarten classroom where play had been centered in the curriculum, will provide the opportunity to more deeply understand the effects that open-ended play can have in the early childhood school setting.

As a result of skill-based instructional and assessment standards along with accountability measures for teachers and students, play has been pushed aside or eliminated altogether from many early childhood classrooms. My research site, which had centered play in the school curriculum, was a unique instance of a public school setting excused from regular state mandates in favor of what was considered an innovative approach. I originally designed this to be an ethnographic study; the research site I chose, a kindergarten classroom, was located in a public elementary school which
had adopted a school-wide curriculum based on play and inspired by the Waldorf approach. I planned my involvement in data collection for the first year and intended to revisit the site as necessary in subsequent school years while I engaged in grounded theory in the iterative, comparative analysis phase of the study (Charmaz, 2014). I believed ethnography would be the most fitting design for my study because I wanted to develop an understanding of the practices of a group of people (Cresswell, 2013), in this case a group of children and their teacher in a play-based kindergarten. As such, I planned to employ ethnographic data collection methods, such as observations, recordings, interviews, and collection of artifacts. I planned to employ data analysis methods such as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999), and mediated discourse analysis (Wohlwend, 2011; Scollon, 2001).

**Population and Setting**

The setting for this study is a kindergarten classroom in a public elementary school serving children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. During the 2016-17 school year, 352 students were enrolled in the school, and 61 of them were kindergarteners. Of those 61 kindergarteners, 52 identified as African American and the remaining 9 identified either as “white” or “two or more races.” The school is located in an urban, residential neighborhood and is located in the largest school district and largest city in its state, which is in the southeastern United States.

In 2012, the state Department of Education announced that four school districts in the state had applied for and been granted permission to become “Districts of Innovation.” This indicated that those districts would be exempt from some state curricular and assessment mandates in order to implement innovative programs in
schools. Districts and individual schools would work closely together to establish expectations, guidelines, and plans for measurement of outcomes. One of these four districts was the one in which my research site school was located. That district announced plans for a district-wide contest in which educators and community members could enter a competition with proposals for Innovative Schools. By July, 2014, finalists were preparing for the final phase of the competition. The winning proposal was coauthored by several early childhood and elementary teachers with backgrounds in the Waldorf approach to education. Their model, later named the Jacaranda Model, emphasized the arts, open-ended sociodramatic play, the incorporation of natural materials in and out of the classroom, and oral storytelling and song, among other divergences from a traditional model of education. The model was assigned to a district elementary school, Marion Elementary, that had been designated a “priority” school by the state Department of Education, meaning that students overall achieved low scores on standardized testing, and doors were set to open with implementation of the new model for the start of the 2015-16 school year.

In the district in which the school is located, children are assigned to school “clusters” according to where they live. Clusters contain six or seven schools scattered geographically throughout the district. Within each cluster is one “reside” school—the school a child lives closest to. Families rank the schools in their assigned cluster as a way of having choice in the school assignment process. There are also magnet programs in schools across the district to which any family can apply, regardless of home address or assigned cluster. The Jacaranda Model was implemented as a magnet program for the entire school in which it was implemented. Thus, many children attended the school
because it was the one that had been assigned to their families, either because they were assigned to the school by default having not participated in the application and ranking system, or because it was in their cluster and they had requested placement there via the ranking system. A much smaller but visible number of students attended the school because they had applied and been accepted to the magnet program. All of these students attended the same classes together, intermixed; no differentiation was made between them by class assignment.

Within the first few months of the first school year, third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders were transitioned back to a more traditional curriculum; school officials cited difficulties implementing the new curriculum along with disruptive and unmanageable student behavior as factors in the decision (Ross, 2015). Teachers reported feeling uncertain through the school year that the model would remain intact for a subsequent year. By the end of the year, however, the (K-2nd) model was still intact and the doors opened for a second school year with the model that August.

According to Jenni and Carrie, the participating teacher and parent, during the 2016-17 school year, the model came under particular scrutiny from the local district school board as well as the state Department of Education, who conducted a school audit that winter. Concerns about behavior and test scores dominated local news reports of public and official opinion about the school. Tensions rose between adults in the school community, including amongst teachers, who were divided in their commitment to the model and to the school. In April of 2017, the district announced that the model would be pulled and the school would return to being a regular cluster school without a magnet program effective immediately.
Marion Elementary occupies an entire city block. It is a long, low, single-story brick building. The surrounding neighborhood has historic roots that are visible from the sidewalks; the houses are grand though many now dilapidated, and wide porches, leafy trees, tall columns, and broad yards are featured prominently. Despite its wealthy and, later, middle-class past, Marion draws in children living below the poverty line from the immediate neighborhood, and violent crime, including gun violence, is not infrequent. There are small businesses, such as liquor stores, convenient stores, and laundromats, in the neighborhood, as well as several churches and daycare facilities. There are also two local industries, including a metal works and a lumber yard. These are all in the blocks immediately surrounding the school. Further afield, about a mile away, is a large chain grocery store. This is the only store of its kind in the neighborhood, and other large chain retail and discount stores are noticeably sparse or absent.

Visitors must be buzzed into the school from the office, and upon entering the building must sign in for a name tag in the office. The hallways around the office are decorated with images of a neighborhood sports legend who went on to international fame; the school has adopted him as an icon of confidence, dedication, and respect. The hallways are wide enough for several lines of children to pass one another, and are marked with lines on the floor like lanes on a road. Halfway down the hallway to the left, then all the way down the hallway to the right, leads to the classroom of Jenni and Rose.

In addition to the classroom and hallways, the setting for this study included the outdoor space the children visited at least twice daily. There was one large, L-shaped play yard, with two different entrances from the school building. The location of the children’s play tended to depend on which door was used to leave the building and enter
the yard. When the teacher led them out the door nearest to the classroom, they generally congregated on the small plastic climber, the size of which indicated that it was meant for younger children, or rolled and climbed on a collection of sections of logs. Just outside the boundary of this part of the yard but still within the high fences of the general yard was a perennial flower garden, and children were sometimes led by the teacher to that area to help water the tangle of plants. When, on other occasions, the class exited the school from the door closest to the hall bathrooms and water fountain, at the other end of the hallway, they tended to play in the wide-open field that comprised the rest of the yard. It was mostly grassy and flat, and included a few seedling trees, a tetherball pole with no ball, another circle of logs for rolling, stacking, or climbing, piles of bamboo sticks, and two raised flower beds. This left a lot of space for gross motor play.

Even though my research site was focused on Jenni’s class and the play and literacy learning that happened there, it was important to me to collect data in other places in the school where the children engaged in these activities in a more informal way. Cohen (2011) argues for a Bakhtinian perspective of play, in which even the play that “escapes adult control” (p. 177) is recognized and valued, particularly for the ways in which it captures children’s agency in subverting teachers’ agendas. Valuing play simply for supporting learning goals is a narrow view, she asserts, and one that undermines the breadth of play’s role in the lives of children. I wanted to have opportunities to observe unsanctioned play as well as understand how the teacher uses outdoor play time and transitional times as parts or extensions of her curriculum.

Participants
In this section, I will describe the participants of the study, including the focal teacher, Jenni, her class of 20 kindergarteners, Jenni’s assistant, Rose, the school principal, Ms. Bond, and the parent of one of the students in the class. I conducted multiple formal and informal interviews with Jenni, and one each with Ms. Bond and the parent, Carrie. I also used observational field notes as a main data source and through these also collected anecdotal data on other school community members, which I will also describe.

Jenni was about to start her eighth year of teaching when I met her. She is a white woman around 40 years old and had come to teaching after years spent working as a cosmetologist, and her warm and loving teaching persona was tempered by a fashionable edge. Jenni’s teaching philosophy was centered around a belief that children need opportunities to engage in sociodramatic play as a way to access their imaginations; their ability to sustain their play scenarios as well as their interest in the stories she told orally without the aid of books or pictures were frequent topics of conversation between us during my time in her classroom. From the time we were introduced, Jenni was an enthusiastic participant; she demonstrated this by her willingness to meet with me, even at her own home, by the way she seemed eager to fill me in, each time we saw one another, on everything that had happened in her classroom since our last meeting, and by her general friendly, interested, and respectful demeanor. She was a coauthor of the proposal for the Jacaranda Model, and felt very emotionally and professionally attached to the success of the implementation of the model at Marion. I think that her willingness to participate in the study stemmed, in part, from her belief in the model and pride in the
fact that it had garnered outside interest. This may have made her feel legitimized in her hard efforts in creating, implementing, and defending the model.

Jenni’s class of 20 kindergarteners began the year as four- and five-year-olds and completed the year as five- and six-year-olds. Eleven children were boys and nine were girls. I was not permitted to gather official information regarding their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, but the grade-level racial breakdown reported above (of 61 kindergarten students, 52 identified as “African-American” and 9 identified as either “white” or “two or more races”) seemed to transfer more or less accurately to this class (School Report Card, [https://applications.education.ky.gov](https://applications.education.ky.gov)). Some of the children had attended the pre-kindergarten program at Marion the year before, but for many, entering school as a kindergartener was their first experience with formal education.

Rose was Jenni’s assistant for the two consecutive years that the Jacaranda model was implemented. She was a tall, regal African-American woman who was in her mid-50s. She seemed to strike a good balance between deferring to Jenni over matters in the classroom while also adeptly handling issues with students as they arose. She and Jenni seemed to share a relationship whereby Jenni was the leader but never seemed to undermine Rose’s authority with the students, and where Rose supported Jenni’s agenda but seemed comfortable and able to care for or redirect students, as necessary, and to conduct whole group and small group activities with students as the given situation called for her to do. She was friendly, welcoming, and conversational with me during my time in the classroom. She seemed cheerful or matter-of-fact with students and with her job as a teaching assistant. She grew up in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the
school, though does not live there anymore, and she sometimes commented on characteristics of the neighborhood as she remembered it as a child.

Ms. Bond was the principal of Marion Elementary. She is a white woman with short blond hair in her mid-50s. Prior to being chosen by the school district superintendent as the new principal for the new Jacaranda Model and Marion Elementary, she had been a principal at a different elementary school for ten years, and worked in the district for 15 years prior to that. I met Ms. Bond over email when I sought her approval to visit Jenni’s class and consider situating a study there; at that time she made a brief comment about the need for further research on play in school, and said that I was welcome in the school as far as she was concerned and that she would defer to Jenni on anything further regarding a study in Jenni’s classroom. I did not have any more direct contact with her until February, when Jenni sought her out with me one day in order to introduce us face-to-face; soon after, I conducted an interview with her.

Carrie is the mother of one of the kindergarten girls in Jenni’s class. She is a white woman around 40 years old, and she has a background in teaching early childhood, particularly from the play-based Reggio-Emilia approach. Carrie and her husband sought out the magnet program at Marion Elementary for their daughter, who is an only child, because of the stated commitment to play and the arts, which she has valued, supported, and emphasized in her own classrooms as a teacher of preschoolers. Carrie told me that although she supported the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary in a general way, she felt that her daughter, an active, creative, and independent-thinking child, would benefit in particular from the approach (interview #1, 2/24/17). She did not think that a traditional, skills-based approach to kindergarten would be a good fit for her daughter.
At the time of my study, Carrie had recently left her position in a university-run preschool in order to begin coursework toward her doctoral degree in education.

During the observations I conducted at Marion Elementary, I encountered children and school personnel who were not directly involved in my study but whose interactions with my participants sometimes caused them to appear in my field notes. For instance, Jenni’s class was often in the play yard while other classes were outdoors, and I was able to observe how these students and teachers interacted with one another. Similarly, I sometimes accompanied Jenni’s class to the cafeteria, where they chose lunches to take back to the classroom; here, too, I was able to observe the routine conducted by the women who prepared and served the students’ lunches. I also was present for many other hallmark school events, such as transitions to special areas like art and library, visits from other teachers to Jenni’s classroom for directed lessons, and even picture day and a fire drill. Field notes from all of these experiences supplemented what I learned about the culture of Jenni’s classroom and gave me a sense of the culture of the school as a whole as well.

**Research Design**

The design of my study included three stages, and despite many other changes that have been made during the time I conducted the study, these three phases have remained relatively intact. The timeline of my study was determined partly by me and partly by the termination of the Jacaranda model. Additionally, although I originally planned to conduct an ethnographic study and left open the idea of returning to the site in subsequent school years for further data collection, the design I eventually reconceptualized was emergent (Creswell, 2013). In fact, from when I first sought
approval from the Institutional Review Board and negotiated with the school district’s Data Management office all the way through learning more about my site during the initial data collection phase, the design, the timeline, and even the emphasis of my questions shifted and changed. In this section, I describe the three stages of my study, as well as data collection and issues specific to research with children and limits to my data collection, data analysis, and the role of the researcher.

Stage One

The first stage involved site selection and entry, attaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the university and from the school district’s Data Management Office, and constructing a timeline for subsequent stages.

*Purposeful sampling.* The first year of the implementation of the Jacaranda Model was my fourth year in a doctoral program. Although I was still in the coursework phase, I had had some experience conducting research under the direction of several different professors, and I was starting to think of possible locales in which to situate a study that would address my research interests, which included sociodramatic play and early literacy along with issues of equity and social justice. I was engaging in purposeful sampling, in which a researcher chooses a specific site or participant (or group of participants) that will be particularly appropriate for exploring the research questions (Creswell, 2013). I sought a site where play was being intentionally included in the curriculum. I had a kindergarten setting in mind because I wanted to observe children engage in sociodramatic play and explore early textual conventions and inventions. Finally, I hoped to find such a site in a public school; because of my interests in equity
and social justice I found it important that my research site be one to which children and families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds had access.

At the end of the first year of implementation of the Jacaranda Model, in a casual conversation with a friend about my doctoral studies, she suggested I look into the school where she worked. At that time, I knew very little about the Schools of Innovation and had never heard of the Jacaranda Model or Marion Elementary. I vaguely knew that my friend had participated in a Waldorf-related professional development event the summer before in preparation for her new job, which turned out to be at Marion, but beyond that I was not aware that a “priority” elementary school had adopted an arts- and play-based curriculum. My friend gave me the name and contact information for the principal, as well as the name of a kindergarten teacher who had coauthored the School of Innovation proposal. Her name was Jenni. (This was the only involvement of my friend in the study; she was not a formal or informal participant.)

**Gaining entry.** I contacted the principal, Ms. Bond, first, who expressed interest in my research topic and in the study itself but who admitted to being too busy preparing for the coming school year to talk with me at length. I asked permission to contact Jenni and explained that I thought I might like to situate my study at her school, and would that be okay. She responded that it was up to Jenni and fine with her. Before I had a chance to respond to Ms. Bond, I received an email from Jenni herself, saying that she had heard from my friend that I was wanting to get in touch with her and that she could not wait to talk with me about her favorite subject, children’s play. She suggested we meet for coffee to talk about my research interests. Gaining entry, then, turned out to be one of the easier parts of my study. Ms. Bond was permissive of my presence in her school
(pending IRB approval), and Jenni was eager to have me, happy to help in her way to contribute to the body of research about young children, play, and early literacy.

**Permissions.** By the time Jenni and I found a time to meet and I had spoken with my advisor in my doctoral program about the possibility of me collecting data in her classroom that year, time was of the essence to attain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the start of the school year. I proposed my study to the IRB, and it was approved under exempt status. I then began the process for permission from the school district’s Data Management, Planning, and Program Evaluation Department. I submitted my proposal during a brief window in time when, because of a recent personnel change in leadership positions, the school district was enforcing particularly stringent guidelines regarding research with children. As a result, I was not permitted to use video- or audio-recording devices in the classroom as I had originally planned, and I was also not permitted to take any photographs that included a child. Additionally, the district at first asked that I collect active consent forms from parents or guardians of every child in the class; after several conversations, involving explanations and negotiations, they relented and were willing to accept passive consent forms in which parents only needed to act if they wanted to opt out, and no one opted out.

Despite the ways that the permissions granted (or not granted) to me constrained me in terms of the data I was able to collect, I recognize the purposes behind the constraints. It is incumbent upon schools to protect children. This includes giving parents voice in whether their children participate in outside research studies as well as being cautious about the permanency and use of audio- and video-recordings. In light of the ease with which digital files can now be shared and distributed, particular caution is
taken to ensure that these recordings, when they exist, are safe and secure. Finally, the
district is committed to protecting schools and classrooms from the distractions and
disruptions that can be caused by researchers visiting a site. Although I was disappointed
that I was not given more broad permission in terms of how and what I could record of
student activity, I understand the ethics involved in studying young children and
appreciate the district advocating for student safety.

These decisions had ramifications that affected not only data collection but also
options for data analysis. For instance, I had thought that I might audio-record children’s
talk and apply discourse analysis (Gee, 2011), or that I might video-record children
engaged in play and/or literacy-related scenarios and analyze the data using mediated
discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001). Indeed, the limitations placed on my data collection
and the implications they had for my data analysis, along with the fluctuating status and
eventual termination of the Jacaranda Model, caused the very approach to qualitative
research in which I planned to engage to evolve at almost every step.

Timeline. While I was involved with seeking permissions for my study, I was
also starting to construct an anticipated timeline. As a full-time working teacher of four-
and five-year-olds, I had often wondered in the past how I would manage to conduct a
research study in a site outside of the private school where I am employed. This issue
ended up falling into place due to factors outside my control and became another instance
of my purposeful sampling: finding a research site that was accessible or convenient to
me (Cresswell, 2013). As it happened, my school’s calendar for the 2016-17 school year
included a weeklong fall break over dates when the local public school district would be
in session. Additionally, the public schools would commence classes one full week
before my school would and, finally, my school had a late-winter weeklong break, as we always did, in February of that year. These three weeks provided me opportunities to conduct what I termed “substantial visits.” I planned to spend the three full days observing in Jenni’s room during Marion’s first three days of the school year, three full days observing again in October, and three full days observing again in February.

I also planned to conduct 120-minute-long observations at two-to-four week intervals throughout the school year, and I termed these “interim visits.” I received permission from my own school’s administration to take professional development half-days off from work in order to conduct these “interim visits.” Although the purpose of these professional development half-days were to collect data at Marion Elementary, I also found my visits to Jenni’s class to be enriching for my own teaching practices. For instance, the deeply empathetic way Jenni responded to children whose feelings were hurt caused me to reflect and focus on how caring I seemed to my own students. I also admired the handmade watercolor paintings and chalk drawings Jenni used to decorate her classroom. Finally, I planned to conduct interviews with adult participants at mutually-convenient times through the school year.

Because I originally conceived of this project as a potentially long-term ethnographic study using grounded theory methods for analysis (Charmaz, 2014), I planned to collect data for the first half of the 2016-17 school year and to begin the iterative, comparative process of analysis and further data collection—theoretical sampling (Charmaz)—during the second half of the year. I also thought it likely or at least possible that I would need to return to the site in subsequent school years to collect more data.
Stage Two

The second stage of the study focused primarily on data collection through substantial and interim observations, interviews with adults, photographing and collecting artifacts from the classroom. In this section, I also discuss issues specific to research with children as well as the limitations that arose for me in collecting data from parents of students.

Data collection. I collected observational field notes from all substantial and interim visits to Marion Elementary, notes from informal conversations and reflections with Jenni, audio-recordings of teacher, principal, and parent interviews and the corresponding transcriptions, sketches of the classroom and play yard, photographs of student work and features of the classroom and the play yard, researcher memos, and documents related to the school, including the written proposal for the Jacaranda Model, the “school report card” (https://applications.education.ky.gov), and local news stories that followed the implementation and later elimination of the Jacaranda Model from Marion Elementary School.

Observations. Children’s play is difficult to quantify; carefully observing and recording their behaviors is an illuminating way to gather information about their abilities, their thinking, their motives, and their impulses. Therefore, employing qualitative research data collection methods such as conducting observations and taking field notes best complements the data I intend to collect. (As aforementioned, it would have been ideal to utilize audio- and video-recording devices, but the school district did not grant me permission to do so.)
**Interviews.** Using interviews—another hallmark practice in qualitative research—as a tool for collecting data from the adult participants in this study (teacher, teacher’s assistant, principal, parents) helped me better understand the practices of these people: why, for example, Jenni planned to make particular curricular choices or why she made the choices she did in the moment while interacting with students; how Ms. Bond, for example, communicated curricular expectations to teachers or how she acted as mediator between district officials and school faculty; and why parents like Carrie choose the schools they have chosen for their children or how they view their involvement as parents at their children’s schools.

Charmaz (2002) describes grounded theory interviews as an “unfolding [of] stories” so that the types of questions asked follow a particular sequence. However, due to the unpredictability regarding the fullness of respondents’ answers, the narrative arc different respondents take on in conveying their experiences, and the unanticipated topics of interest that may emerge during an interview, Charmaz and others (Spradley, 1979; Cicourel, 1964; Marsh, 2006) acknowledge that the script of an ethnographic interview must remain flexible and open to pursuing the unexpected. In general, Charmaz recommends starting with very broad, open-ended questions (“Tell me about what happened” p. 679), followed, if necessary, by more open-ended but more topically-specific questions (“Tell me how you would describe the person you are now” p. 680), and, if necessary, by more open-ended but concluding questions (“After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone?” p. 680). Charmaz makes the point that just as interviews begin in informal, chatty manners as the interviewer and
interviewee prepare to share a social act (Spradley, 1979; Cicourel, 1964), so too should they be brought to an end in a normal conversational tone.

The questions I asked adult participants generally fell into 5 categories (see appended interview protocols):

1. Perceptions about the importance of play in early childhood.
2. Tensions between a play-based kindergarten and a more traditional skills-based schooling experience.
3. Curricular issues related to play in early childhood school settings.
4. Social or behavioral issues related to play in early childhood school settings.
5. Demographic information [age, race, years of experience in education (for teachers and administrators), age(s) of children (for parents)].

Issues specific to research with children. Corsaro (1985) discusses at length the gradual ways in which he entered the field in his preschool research site. He started observing near the beginning of the school year, and the directors at the school of his site suggested that he conduct initial observations from a concealed observation booth before joining the children and teachers in the classrooms. The reasoning behind this suggestion was that the start of the year was considered to be traumatic for the children, causing the teachers to also be a little on edge. In contrast, I was invited to begin observing (and indeed, had planned the first of my substantial visits to take place) starting the first day of school. This worked well for my purposes and, I believe, the students and teachers in the room. The children were older than Corsaro’s preschoolers and seemed more prepared and able to handle the separation from their families that occurred on the first morning and each subsequent morning thereafter. Furthermore, I was a fixture in their classroom from the beginning; my presence never seemed to interfere with what they came to know to expect. My experiences as a classroom teacher of four- and five-year-olds is that children are delighted to see familiar yet unexpected faces in the classroom, such as
when, for instance, a child’s parent visits, or when another teacher from the school pops in. This was the type of response my presence sometimes elicited: my visit might be a pleasant surprise but soon enough the children were back at their regular routine, now with me as a part. Finally, Jenni’s demeanor—she demonstrated her authority in the classroom without seeming domineering, and was simultaneously calm and loving—and the way that affected the culture of her classroom made the presence of a third adult (me) seem inconsequential. The casual and familiar way the children treated me on subsequent substantial and interim visits to the classroom convinced me that they considered me a part of the group of teachers and school adults with whom they regularly interacted. They did not seem surprised by my interactions with them, whether those be child-initiated, such as when a boy approached me to help him tie a baby carrier on his chest, or initiated by me, such as when I reminded the children to walk safely in the hallway. I did not feel as though my presence tainted the research site by causing the children or teachers to act differently than they ordinarily did.

Corsaro (1985) also found gradual ways to introduce his observational recording equipment in ways that allowed his child participants to feel comfortable and, eventually, ignore their use. I did not have to make these considerations because I was not permitted to record in the classroom, but occasionally a child would approach me to ask what I was writing in my notebook. These instances often felt more like attempts to interact rather than true interest in my notes, but I usually answered with something along the lines of, “Oh, I’m just writing down what I hear and see so I don’t forget anything;” this type of explanatory but not engaging response typically seemed to satisfy the questioner.
Limits to my data collection. As a white, university student who was not a teacher or a parent at Marion, I was in an outsider class of my own. I had hoped that my substantial visits would give me opportunities to make my face a familiar one to any parents who might often be present at the school and that way make connections with parents who would be willing to talk with me about their thoughts and feelings about play, early literacy, and their child’s experience in the Jacaranda Model. Although there were several mothers who I did see on a regular basis, and despite the fact that Jenni attempted to negotiate this concern of mine by mentioning me and my study to parents directly (by sending home a letter for me at the start of the year, by encouraging parents to contact me at her parent/teacher conferences, as part of email or phone conversations with parents she thought would be likely to agree), I was only able to recruit one parent to be a part of the study. This participant, Carrie, was the parent of a student who attended Marion as a part of the magnet program and was amenable in part because she is a doctoral student herself and was sympathetic to my need for parent participants.

Carrie and I are members of and enact many of the same social worlds (Fontana, 2002). We are both white mothers, we live in a relatively similar part of town, particularly in relation to the location of Marion Elementary, we have both managed to make the necessary sacrifices to pursue doctoral degrees in the same college of the same university, and we share similar philosophies on parenting and on teaching. When I saw her at a Marion Elementary kindergarten fall festival and asked her if she would be willing to allow me to interview her, she replied in the affirmative with little hesitation. Even more telling of our shared social worlds, we had little difficulty finding a neutral place to talk. I was able to secure a small meeting room in the building where our
education classes usually meet. We are both very familiar and comfortable in this space, but would have been just as comfortable visiting one another in each other’s homes, as I did on two occasions with Jenni, or in any number of coffee shops (as I also did on one occasion with Jenni) convenient to either of our residences or to the university. We considered these alternative options before settling on the university meeting room because it was most convenient to us both on the particular day we planned to meet; I believe that negotiating the details of this meeting was casual and easy for us both.

In contrast, I had difficulty connecting with the two African-American mothers of students at Marion who I had encountered at school the most. I was not sure how to access our shared social worlds, if indeed we shared any. As aforementioned, I was an outsider to their school community, and my presence in their children’s school, with the express purpose of studying what was happening there, may have made them feel as though I was there to objectify their children’s schooling experience. I was introduced to one of them by Jenni on several occasions but never received more than a perfunctory nod. The other mother I met more than once was, in both instances (which were only days apart), outwardly friendly but also heavily pregnant and with a young toddler in tow; I could not bring myself to ask for her time. With both women, I was aware I was asking a favor of them (Graue & Hawkins, 2005) and that I did not seem to have anything to offer in return. Jenni sometimes used me as a third adult in the classroom, such as when I worked with a small group of children on how to write their names. I was happy to help Jenni, particularly in teacherly activities in which I felt competent; I felt indebted to her for her time in our interviews and for all the ways she provided me windows into her classroom goings-on. I also tried to find token ways of thanking Jenni and the class
for allowing me access to their classroom and learning; for instance, when I was invited to the class Harvest Festival on an autumn weekend, I brought cider and miniature pumpkins for the children and, several days later, I delivered a large pumpkin to Jenni’s house so she could carve it in the classroom with her students. I did not feel able to help these mothers in any particular or meaningful way, and I could not afford to compensate them monetarily for their time. I would have been eager to offer to take them out to a coffee shop to talk, but I was not familiar with any establishments in the vicinity of Marion that would compare to the characteristics (in terms of permitting customers to linger while also offering a quiet atmosphere that would allow for private and recorded conversation) of the local and chain coffee shops that are ubiquitous in the parts of town where I live, work, and attend university. As a result, I feel that this study contributed to the silencing of the voices of these and other parents in a schooling process and in a community in which their voices were already silenced or excluded. In what I envisioned would be a critical ethnography (Fontana & Frey, 1994) in which I was working to undermine oppressive systems and policies, this, to me, is a significant limitation in the data.

**Stage Three**

This stage of the study was a phase for grounded theory methods of analysis, which included further data collection (Charmaz, 2014). I also collected additional data by conducting follow-up interviews with Jenni and with Carrie and by examining digital and print documents about the adoption of the Jacaranda Model and its subsequent cancelation.
Data analysis. I employed grounded theory methods in my data collection and in my analysis. “Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1). Analyzing the rich descriptions of observed behavior from Stage Two led into the iterative analysis phase of the research project, in which coding one set of data would reveal the need for further theoretical sampling and data collection.

Charmaz (2002), Spradley (1979), Cicourel (1964), Marsh (2006) and others suggest that in ethnographic, grounded theory interviews, researchers may or may not need to conduct follow-up questions. This may depend on a variety of factors, including but not limited to the interpretation of the initial questions by the interviewee, whether the anticipated topics are indeed the discussed topics, and whether the flow of the interview continues in a positive way. In this study, I conducted one final interview each with Carrie and with Jenni. These interviews focused less on the subject matter of my initial interview protocols and more on the phenomenon of what happened at Marion Elementary in regards to the implementation and elimination of the Jacaranda Model, the interventions or lack thereof from the district and state, and the voices of the community members and other stakeholders who have and have not been heard. I also asked Carrie if she had connected on a personal level with any other parents from Jenni’s class who might have been interested in letting me interview them, but she had no leads for me.

These further interviews reflected the shifting design and focus of my study. I began the study thinking I would have the opportunity to observe, reflect, and analyze the play/literacy nexus in a public school setting with a complex stratification of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. What captured my attention—and that of my
adult participants—instead was the contested nature of the curriculum itself and the policies and power struggles that swirled around it. After consulting with my dissertation committee, I decided to reconceptualize my study as a phenomenological case study. Phenomenology involves the exploration of a phenomenon with a group of individuals and descriptions of the essences of their experiences in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Here, the phenomenon involved the varying degrees, in constant flux, that the state, district, principal, teachers, and parents supported or failed to support the Jacaranda Model, and the ways that policies affected the experiences of the children in Jenni’s kindergarten, who were supposed to be attending a school in which play and the arts were expressly central to the curriculum. Case study involves the identification of a single, bounded case (Creswell). Here, the case is an intrinsic one, meaning that it has particular interest in and of itself, rather than an instrumental one, which can be used as a representative of other cases like it. Both traditions rely on data collection methods similar to ethnography, including observations and interviews, and on rich descriptions and presentations of understanding. Thus, while phenomenological case study is the way I conceptualized my site and study, I drew from the relevant methods of ethnography, phenomenology, and case study, and I used grounded theory methods to drive the analysis.

**Role of the Researcher**

Ethnographic methods are deliberate, involve reflexivity, and are dependent on the characteristics of the social acts and worlds we study (Atkinson & Coffey, 2002). The identity(ies) of the researcher has an enormous impact on a research study during all phases, including preparatory, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination.
Reflexivity is an important concept at all stages of conducting a research study (Charmaz, 2014). Researchers should always be aware of the ways that their own preconceptions and identities surface. Researchers can track their awareness of these constructs by writing memos, which are also used to explore and interrogate analytic codes and which can later be incorporated into the reporting of the findings. Although it remains important to note one’s reflexivity, in terms of the inherent privilege of being a researcher, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker (2007) warn that too much focus on reflecting on one’s identity in the reporting can lead to further suppression of the identities of the participants and inflated significance attributed to the researcher. This would maintain the very imbalance of power that reflexivity seeks to relieve or reveal.

For me, as an experienced classroom teacher of the same age group as the students in Jenni’s room, I found it difficult to not be comparative as I observed her interactions and practices. I often thought, how would I handle this situation?, how would I do things differently?, or wow—write that down—I am going to try that tomorrow! as I watched her interactions with students. She was sometimes faced with challenges unfamiliar to me, and I would take mental note of the ways in which she addressed these. Similarly, there were times when I observed her being faced with challenges she seemed less confident in handling. In these instances, I could not help but think through how I would have managed the situation. I tried to be cognizant of these thoughts, and to record them, so that I would not inadvertently allow them to affect the data I collected. Overall, rather than conflicting with my role as a researcher, I think my background in early childhood education helped me understand more about the decisions Jenni made in conducting her classroom.
From the perspective of symbolic realism, people are creators of their own worlds (Czarniawska, 2007), and language is an intrinsic part of this creation. To demonstrate fidelity to the study and its participants, then, the researcher should represent them in their own terms (Eder & Fingerson, 2007). Charmaz (2014) argues that researchers should use descriptions—rather than interpretations—of specific actions from the empirical data with a focus on the participants to support assertions.

Data and analysis are produced from the relationships between the researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014), and relationships shift according to who and what are privileged and revealed, and who and what are suppressed and obscured (Muth, 2016). The identities and languages inherent in these roles affect the coding of the data (Charmaz, 2014), which ripples through the analysis and reporting of the study to affect how participants are framed (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Thus, it was incumbent on me, the researcher, to keep these issues at the forefront during all phases of the study. One way I accomplished this during the analytic phase of the study was by making sure that the codes that I developed emerged specifically from the data. Overly-general initial codes can isolate the data from the analysis and leave room for assumptions, prejudices, or premature interpretations.

**Issues of Validity**

My study will address issues of validity according to the recommendations made by Creswell (2013). First, I engaged with the participants, if not the site, over time; although the site of Marion Elementary under the Jacaranda Model turned out to be more temporary than I anticipated, I maintained my relationships with Jenni and Carrie and was able to continue to interview and communicate with them even after the Jacaranda
Model was terminated. The long-term maintenance of these relationships helped me locate salient aspects of the study that were relevant to the original questions, sometimes in unexpected ways. For instance, when I started to step back and think about the confusion and disruptions caused by the inconsistent and lackluster implementation of the Jacaranda Model, I began to realize that the scope of my study was not limited to the confines of Jenni’s classroom.

Second, I engaged in triangulation; that is, I used a variety of data sources, including interviews with participants with diverse perspectives, observational field notes from Jenni’s classroom and play yard, community documents such as newspapers and other digital and print sources, and photographs of student work and Jenni’s classroom. I clarified my own researcher biases and identities in the body of my dissertation as well as in the autoethnographic prologue, in which I wrote about my experiences conducting the study. I wrote “rich, thick description[s]” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) of my participants, the views and thoughts they shared with me, and the social practices I observed in research site itself. Utilizing these strategies strengthened my study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I situated my methodology in the research site of Jenni’s class in Marion Elementary School. I described the setting and recent history of Marion and how the Jacaranda Model came to be as well as the participants in my study, including Jenni, the teacher, her assistant, Rose, the children in their class, their principal, Ms. Bond, and Carrie, a parent. I described the three stages of my study; these included descriptions of planning, seeking approval, and gaining entry, and the timeline of data collection and analysis. I discussed issues specific to my study, such as my difficulty recruiting parent
participants and my reconceptualization of the study design, as well as issues related to
research with children in general. Finally, I included a brief review of literature
regarding the role of the researcher and how that has affected me in this study. In the
next chapter, I discuss the study’s findings.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Their play is becoming so rich!

– Jenni, observational field notes, 10/10/16

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of literacy development in a kindergarten classroom in which the curriculum focused on open-ended play in order to understand more about the role of play in children’s school-based literacy learning. Additionally, I sought to explore issues of equity and access in schooling in order to better understand more about how centering play in the kindergarten curriculum affects children, teachers, families, and schools. In the previous chapter, I described the methodology I used to collect data to address these questions, and in this chapter, I present the findings of the data drawn from formal and informal interview and observational field notes from substantial and interim observations. The perspectives and experiences of the lead teacher, Jenni, during the implementation of the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary School present the reader with a portrait of a classroom in which play is a cornerstone of the curriculum, including the role the teacher played in its design. The proposal of the Jacaranda Model offers a look at the original intended curriculum to compare with my observations and Jenni’s experiences. Portraits of Ms. Bond, the principal of Marion, and Carrie, a Marion parent whose daughter attending kindergarten
in Jenni’s class as a member of the magnet program at Marion, characterize varying conceptualizations of play in the early childhood curriculum and detail the perspectives of administrators, parents, and students of the Jacaranda Model at Marion. I address the issues related to equity, access, and social justice in early education that rose to the surface of my research with these participants and in regards to Marion and the inception, duration, and cancellation of the Jacaranda Model. Finally, I return to Jenni to write about the personal, emotional journey she experienced as a coauthor of the Jacaranda Model proposal and as a teacher during its implementation and its aftermath.

**Jenni**

*I want to hold on to play because I think it’s so important [to] their socialization and just learning how the world works and having a mutual respect for one another, taking care of yourself but also taking care of those around you, you know, all of those pieces, and having a healthy emotional state, you know. Playing is just so important in life.*

—Jenni, interview #1, 11/18/16

I conducted interviews with Jenni and substantial and interim observations in her classroom, and data from these focused on her understanding of children and their development and play as evidenced in her observed teaching practices and espoused beliefs in our interviews; tensions between traditional instruction and the alternative approaches to educating children outlined in the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014); her experiences, including emotional and political ones, at Marion as a kindergarten teacher and coauthor of the Jacaranda Model; and her perspectives on issues of race, socioeconomic, and equity at Marion Elementary School.

**Relationship between Researcher and Participants**
Although my role in this study was primarily that of a researcher, my presence in the classroom as an observer of and amongst the children had different implications at different times. Similarly, my frequent visits to Jenni’s classroom and the many personal and professional similarities we shared inspired a mutually respectful relationship, the nature of which was dependent on circumstance and context.

Conducting research with children requires special considerations. Corsaro (1985) writes extensively about the reactions his presence elicited from the children in his study of young children’s social interactions and peer culture, and he took particular care negotiating his entry into the field in order to preserve his study’s setting and diminish the disruption his presence might cause the children in their school environment. Whereas he entered his field of study after the children’s school year was already well established, my first day of observations coincided (deliberately) with the students’ first day of kindergarten. My experiences were somewhat different from Corsaro’s mainly, I think, because I was present in the children’s classroom starting on their very first day of school. I was, at the very least, a part of the scenery from the beginning.

The students regarded me in different ways at different times. Often, particularly when the children were engaged in a whole group activity under Jenni’s direction, such as their morning circle time, I was ignored altogether. In this context, while children were gathered on the rug or, later, sitting at tables, I usually positioned myself on one of the benches along the perimeter of the gathering area where I might unobtrusively watch the group. Frequently, around the time of the sound of the morning bell at 9 o’clock, a child or two would trickle into the room with an unfinished breakfast from the cafeteria in hand. Jenni permitted these children to quickly and quietly finish eating from the
periphery and, perhaps for the sake of camaraderie, they would often choose a spot on a bench near me. I would give a quick welcoming smile; the child might return my smile and scootch closer or regard me warily and groggily before finishing breakfast and scampering to join the group on the rug on the floor.

Similarly, when the children were broken into groups to go off to play in various areas of the classroom, I would choose an out-of-the-way spot from which to observe and take notes. Sometimes I was regarded as more of a prop to their play, such as when a child in the dramatic play kitchen area took my dinner order, along with those of several of her peers, as a part of her restaurant play scenario. I was sometimes sought out by individuals or small groups of children to read stories to them during their open play time. Once, a boy who had had verbal and physical outbursts throughout the morning approached me from the kitchen area and asked me to help him strap a doll to his chest with one of the child-sized baby carriers. The whole time I worked to secure the doll according to how he envisioned it he described to me how a classmate’s father had come into the classroom that morning and had been wearing his infant son on his chest. On another visit, this same child had been taken out of the classroom by a resource teacher in an effort to help him calm down from an angry moment. Upon reentering the classroom, he quietly approached me – I was sitting on a bench while the children conducted their morning meeting – and asked, “Did they have fun in here while I was gone?” I asked him what he thought; he shrugged, quietly took my hand, and sat down beside me.

Outdoors, I had opportunities to observe children’s play from afar and in close proximity to the places I chose to stand to observe. Because of the openness of the play yard and the relative lack of physical restrictions, the children had more freedom of
movement; this seemed to result in fewer occasions for interactions between the children and the adults. On one occasion, when two months had passed since my last visit and I was conducting a substantial observation during an unseasonably warm week in February, a group of children rushed to bring me to their garden beds where crocuses and snowdrops were in bloom, and where the pointy green tops of a row of irises were poking up through the soil. Generally, however, my time with Jenni’s class in the play yard was given over to observing rather than interacting with the children and chatting with Jenni about recent curricular or policy shifts in her classroom or school.

As the school year went on, particularly in the second half of the school year, my visits were less frequent, and very occasionally, the children would seem to attempt to take advantage of me or my presence. For instance, when a resource teacher read a story aloud to the class while Jenni was out of the room conducting assessments with an individual child, few children seemed to be connecting to the story. Instead, many were rolling around on the rug or wandering around the classroom. Their inattention was ignored by the teacher, so I followed suit. When one after another of the children
approached me to say they were cold, needed to use the bathroom, or were thirsty, I either ignored them and trained my eyes on the teacher in an attempt to model for them what they were expected to be doing, looked at them with my finger to my lips to remind them to be quiet, or whispered that they should go sit on the rug. The children did not heed my prompts and reminders, either because Jenni – my basis of authority – was out of the room, because my face and presence were less familiar than they had been earlier in the year and the children had realized that I did not have a formal teaching role in the class, or because connecting to the story and lesson was recognized as too big of a stretch (in this particular case, the resource teacher seemed to do very little to modify her reading plans to accommodate the fact that the children were not engaging with her lesson).

Jenni sometimes involved me in the classroom in what I felt were, to varying degrees, more teacherly roles, and these also affected the nature of my presence with the children and transformed me into something beyond a simple observer. For instance, once as we walked together down the school hallways, Jenni leading the class and me walking at the end of the line, a child needed her individual attention and she asked me to lead the line of the rest of the children to our destination, the school library. One day, she had to step out of the room for a moment, and different groups of children were finishing up working and playing around the room and had already been told to come to the rug. To occupy them while Jenni was in the hall and while Rose tidied up their work areas, I taught them the words and accompanying movements to a song called “Grandma Moses.” Once, just after I’d arrived, Jenni mentioned to me how overloaded she felt. When I asked how I could help, she asked me if I would work with a group of four children as they practiced identifying the letters in their names. Lacking any further
direction, I quickly gathered the supplies I needed to do an activity I have done with my own students in which I write their names in large letters on strips and then cut the strips into individual letters. These can be used over and over again like a jigsaw puzzle or pieced together and glued down on another sheet to be used as a guide for when children need to write their own names. Some of these events were preceded by informal conversations between Jenni and me that the children could hear; in these cases, they were witness to their teacher, a symbol of adult authority in most classrooms, explicitly conferring authority to me, a sometime visitor to their classroom. In other cases, such as when I, as an experienced classroom teacher, recognized the need for an adult to take charge of the attention of the group in the stead of their otherwise-occupied teacher, they saw me independently assume the role of leadership and seemed to willingly accept it.

The experiences I had with Jenni’s students stand in contrast to the experiences Corsaro (1985) describes, wherein his interventions for safety’s sake “were always countered with ‘You’re not a teacher!’ or ‘You can’t tell us what to do!’” (p. 31). Instead, whether the children directly solicited my participation, or Jenni requested my involvement, or I noticed a need and contributed to the management of the classroom in the absence of a teacher, the members of Jenni’s class community seemed to recognize me as one of them. Even though the frequency of my visits to their classroom decreased over the course of the year, in the eyes of the children I seemed to hold a place of belonging, which seemed to have the effect of diminishing the disruption my presence could have caused.

My data also indicate the complex professional and, later, personal relationship that developed between Jenni and me. I was eager to assist Jenni as she needed because I
was grateful to her for showing early and definitive interest in my research, for agreeing to allow me to spend so much time in her classroom, and for persistently though futilely encouraging parents of students in her class to participate in interviews with me. Additionally, her continued willingness to participate contributed to the eventual broadening of my focus in my research setting. Because of this, I was eager to reciprocate by supporting her work in the classroom, whether that be by contributing my expertise as a teacher such as when I helped with the specific classroom duty of working with a small group of students (as described above) or by contributing in tangible ways such as when I purchased a large carving pumpkin for her class to open and explore. In these instances, I was inserting myself or being inserted into the responsibilities of running the classroom.

There were also instances when Jenni indicated involvement or investment in my research directions. For instance, at the start of one interview, as I explained the nature of the questions I intended to ask her that evening, she responded, “I was thinking about it, too!…I wonder if we should focus more on *how* do you make play equitable in a public setting” (interview #2, 4/6/17). Here, by using the word “we,” Jenni demonstrated that she had not only been reflecting on my observations and interviews and our shared informal conversations, but that she has also developed suggestions of her own for the directions of the research. Although we each remained in our respective roles – she as classroom teacher and me as researcher – there emerged fluidity in these roles that supported our working relationship.

As I have discussed, the complexity of my role as researcher and my relationships with my participants in Jenni’s room were dependent on several factors. First, research with children presents special circumstances, and depending on the particular contextual
setting in the classroom, I was occasionally strictly an observer in a seat on the periphery of the classroom, I was sometimes drawn into the children’s interactions by their solicitation of my conversation or role in their play, and at other times I played a more teacherly role with them in both spontaneous and planned situations. Second, my relationship with Jenni, the classroom teacher, was reflective of our similarities in professional approaches and interests. In circumstances that arose during my time in her classroom, I was willing to assist her in her teaching and management. Similarly, she regularly expressed an active interest in my research and its directions, and she seemed to feel genuinely vested in its progress and implications.

**Child Development and Children at Play at School: Jenni’s Classroom**

In Jenni’s initial correspondence with me, she wrote over email, “It has come to my attention that you have been trying to reach out and connect with me about my deepest passion, children and play” (email correspondence, 7/15/16). It was Jenni’s understanding of child development along with her personal passions for the visual and performing arts that led her to value play in the early childhood curriculum. Her emphasis on play as a curricular touchstone was evident to me in the design of her physical classroom, in her use of instructional time at school, and in her interactions with children as recorded in my observational field notes and in our interviews. Indeed, when the local, urban school district called for entries in a contest to name a new “School of Innovation,” it was Jenni’s beliefs in children and in play that inspired her to coauthor and propose the Jacaranda Model in response to the call.

**Physical space.** The first time I entered Jenni’s classroom (see figure 4.1), I was struck at how naturally calming it seemed. Almost all the furniture – the long benches,
the play kitchen, the teacher’s table, the dollhouse, the bookshelves, the rocking chair, and the large basket of building blocks – were made of wood, much of it in smooth, blond finishes. Cream-colored muslin curtains hung from the row of windows in the back of the room, and when the windows were open (through most of the start of the year since the building’s air conditioner did not adequately cool the classroom) they blew softly in the breeze. Decorations hanging on the wall, including an collection of large alphabet cards depicting letters and objects, had been hand-drawn in oil pastel by Jenni; these lent softness to the otherwise institutional-looking cinderblock walls. Near the door, on top of a shelf that housed woven baskets of crayons, glue sticks, yarn, and other supplies, was a pitcher and bowl made of glazed and fired clay; upon entry to the room each morning, Jenni or Rose would pour cool water over the children’s hands and hand them cotton towels for drying them. This not only signified the start to their school day, but also added to the air of calming earthiness in the classroom itself.

Figure 4.2 Jenni’s classroom

**Instructional time.** Jenni reported to me that she believed children learn how the world works through their play, and it was for this reason that she felt so strongly about
giving her students play opportunities throughout their days together. She thinks that children grow socially, cognitively, and physically, in ways they could not otherwise, through their play experiences and interactions. Additionally, she believes that teachers can glean important insights about children’s learning and development by observing them in their play. In my time observing her classroom, Jenni demonstrated an understanding of child development and children’s needs through the design of her regular classroom routines, including morning circle with movement and music activities, open-ended play, outdoor play, and stories told aloud, as well as her interactions with individual children.

**Morning circle.** Every morning, Jenni would sing a song to gather the class in a circle on the rug. They would then sing a greeting song, such as the “Good Morning” song, in which each child was greeted by name in unison by the rest of the group: “Good morning, to Kelvin, I hope you have a wonderful day! Good morning, to Kelvin, I hope you have a wonderful day!” Children’s faces would brighten as the song made its way around the circle. Jenni would lead the children through a series of other songs, poems, and chants, many having particular seasonal (“Five little leaves so happy and gay!”) or social (“Stop and think/ Look and see/ What’s going on?/ What about me?”) relevance, and all involving movement on the part of the children. Finally, Jenni would read to them from the morning message, which always told the children about what would happen at school that day. Jenni’s daily morning circle gave her students a measure of predictability by following a general pattern every day and by giving specific information about their upcoming day at school.
Outdoor play. After conducting the morning meeting, Jenni usually took the children outdoors to play. Here, children would engage independently and with peers for thirty to sixty minutes. Although equipment to support their play was sparse, the children were creative in finding ways to entertain themselves. There was a long, narrow flower garden, and children often hung around the tall tangled zinnias and coneflowers to spot butterflies and other insects. Some of the children often played on the gentle slope of a slight hill, bare of grass, at one end of the play yard. They had discovered that the hill often offered a bit of a breeze; handfuls of dry dirt they scraped from the ground and tossed in the air became billowing clouds of dust. Their diligence and delight were evident from across the play yard. At other times, children converged on a small plastic play structure and cooperated in co-created games, such as one in which a child would load wood chips onto the bottom of the slide. At her signal, a child waiting at the top of the slide would come down, barreling into the pile of chips and sending them flying. That child would then be the loader, and a new child would await the signal from the top
of the slide. Children also used the long sticks of bamboo that were scattered around the play yard to play a game similar to limbo, where they would take turns attempting to cross under a stick continually lowered by two other children. When the stick became too low to go under, it would become a jumping game and players were challenged to jump ever-higher to cross the stick.

![Figure 4.4 A map of the play yard](image)

**Open-ended play.** Back inside the classroom, Jenni usually assigned the children to different areas of the classroom for an open-ended playtime in groups of about four children each. The students had daily opportunities to engage in sociodramatic play with blocks, in a kitchen area, and with a woodland dollhouse. In addition, there typically was at least one teacher-led art activity happening as well. Examples of these included sewing with felt, making bead necklaces, watercolor painting, or drawing with chalk or oil pastels. In the kitchen area, episodes like the following were typical:

One girl takes orders from the two at the table. They ask for eggs, and she responds, “Two eggs, coming up!” She gets wooden eggs out and cracks them on the side of the pot. One of her customers comes in to take the eggs out of the pot and she shouts, “No! She’s trying to steal my bakery!” Other kids now are mopping and sweeping around the table at which they were just sitting. One boy is in “time out” [as part of the play scenario] –
he has gone into the corner and the other children shut a pretend door. The waitress/cook is still at the stove but her customers are no longer at their table. She suddenly exclaims, “Kitchen closed!” and pulls the curtain that makes up the roof of the kitchen down over the front of the kitchen area. (observational field notes, 8/11/16)

Children’s play here was inventive, active, loud, and fluid.

The blocks in this classroom were rough hewn and cut from limbs and branches; most pieces had bark on them. I observed children using these as boats loaded down with pretend gas tanks, and as puppet mouths, attempting to chomp through the basket containing the blocks, in addition to building realistic and abstract structures.

Although the natural wood dollhouse in this class was inhabited by a cast of handmade wooden woodland animals, in my notes the children invariably either ignored the animals altogether and engaged in prop-less dramatic play scenarios or projected human personalities on the animals for domestic dramatic play:

One girl to another: “Pretend the mommy’s not here!” then “Mommy, mommy, it’s a monster!” “Come on sister, come on brother!” “3! 2! 1! Lock it – ooh I’m flying!” “Sister you have to carry this stuff for mom!” (observational field notes, 10/10/16)

The space where the dollhouse was stored was a tight corner of the classroom, and children playing there often seemed to be spilling out.

While children were at play, Rose was usually overseeing the work of a small group of children engaged in an art activity. Jenni was often also working with a group on a project or else wandering the room, observing the children or mediating the conflicts, typical in early childhood classrooms, that arose between them.
Stories. Jenni used oral storytelling as a way to help her students build visualization skills, and she was deliberate in what she chose to tell. The Wild and Restless Pony, for instance, was a horse who was, as she put it, “kicking in the stable and it’s disrupting all the other animals that live in the barn and they are getting tired of it, and the story ends up that the stable keeper brushes his coat and cleans his hooves and it settles the pony and he calms down and everybody likes to be around him again” (interview #1, 11/18/16). She would tell stories like this one frequently, and often repeat the same one regularly, to help the children build the ability to visualize and, later, draw or act out the character of the pony. She also conducted class conversations about characters like this pony, so the children would have the opportunity to verbally explore why the pony felt wild and restless and what happened to help him be a happier member of the group of stable animals. Over time, children seemed to become attached to the characters they heard stories about, and Jenni used group conversations about the animal characters as inroads to talking about conflicts and successes that children in the class were experiencing in their own social interactions with one another.

Interactions with individual children. The empathetic way Jenni sought to understand and support her students was evident most of all in her individual interactions
with them. It seemed important to her that children knew she respected them as people. On the first day of school, as she greeted a crying child who did not want to part with her mother, Jenni bent down to tell her, “The first day of school goes really fast” (observational field notes, 8/10/16). This was one of the first things I heard Jenni say to a child, and I was struck by how she did not intrude on the child’s feelings by trying to convince her that she would have fun that day, but rather validated the child by accepting her feelings and encouraging her from a different angle.

In our final interview, she told me about running into one of her former students about 8 months after he had finished his kindergarten year with her. He was a child I knew from observing in her room, and he was frequently physically or verbally reactive to children around him and often so sleepy at school that he would request his rest mat and take naps in the corner of the room, sometimes for three or four hours. When she greeted him in the halls of his new school, he smiled at her and asked who she was. “I said, ‘I’m Miss [Jenni], I was your…” [and] he goes, “Oh yeah! You were my kindergarten teacher at [Marion]!”’ (interview #3, 5/28/18). When she related this story to me, Jenni marveled that she had never had that happen to her before. She said she thought, “Wow! He really had a lot going on in his life to not remember that time span…of his formative year. He just, just, completely no recollection of it” (interview #3, 5/28/18). This encounter demonstrated the broad view Jenni took with her students. Her perspective of him echoes the adage that “the disruptive child is the disrupted child” (source unknown), and she used what she saw in children’s behavior and interactions to try to understand and care for them better.
When children came to Jenni for help solving social problems with other children, she was almost invariably empathetic to the children’s needs. “You have a lot of words” (observational field notes, 8/10/18), I heard her remind children on more than one occasion. She would listen to the child or children who came to her and respond to them in ways that affirmed their feelings. “She said that to you? That would make me sad, too!” or “People are telling me that you’re hitting them, and it’s making them feel angry” were typical ways she might respond to children. Problem-solving, in Jenni’s classroom, was mostly an airing of grievances, which children seemed to have many opportunities to do. However, I rarely observed instances where there was a conversation, mediated by an adult or conducted independently, in which children could talk out their feelings or hurts with one another. An angry child might get rocked and read to, and disruptive children might be calmly taken for a walk in the halls with a teacher, and a child with hurt feelings might get hugged and listened to, but I rarely, if ever, noticed opportunities for children, supported by a teacher, in any of these situations to, for example, check in with the children they’d hit, or to talk directly with the child who had hurt them.

Despite what I considered to be a lack of follow-through available to the children who were involved on either side of conflicts with peers, I saw regular evidence of Jenni’s attempts to empathize and care for her students when they were experiencing problems. In her interactions with individual children, she seemed eager to understand them and make them feel understood.

Observing children in play. Jenni demonstrated a strong understanding of and appreciation for child development, and in her view, the most effective way to reveal what and how her students were learning, both socially and academically, was by
observing them in their play. “I’ve found that the more tolerant I am and the more that I watch, the more I understand” (interview #1, 11/18/16). She repeated this sentiment in all of our formal interviews and in many of our informal conversations, and I watched it in action in her classroom, as well. She read them books about common insects, and then observed as they combed through the tall flowers and weeds of the garden and knew they were expanding on what they had seen in books. She watched as one child in the block area gathered slices of a tree limb in graduated sizes to build a rounded pyramid-like structure, and knew she was exploring properties of size. She saw restless children during circle time and invited them to sit in her lap. Jenni’s practices and interactions with her students were informed by what she first watched them do without her.

**Supporting children through play.** Jenni was motivated to coauthor the Jacaranda Model because of her commitment to children and early childhood education. According to her descriptions in our interviews and the practices I saw her embody in her classroom, she thought that children can and should be supported in their learning through play opportunities, and she believed that by observing her students in play she could make informed decisions about how best to support their learning and development as a group of children in a classroom and as individuals. Additionally, she thought that the support she could offer them could address different areas of development, and that she could choose to introduce specific activities, materials, or experiences according to what she thought will capture their attention and fuel further learning explorations. Above all, Jenni thought it is of paramount importance that children are made to feel successful and confident, particularly in their early schooling experiences, and she tried to recognize the strides they made through the play they enact.
Management versus tolerance. Jenni countered the common practice of insisting that all children sit and listen or engage similarly in whole-group lessons and activities and instead she said that tolerance of children’s behaviors can give a teacher a sense of their needs and give the child a chance to meet those needs. I observed her putting this idea into practice, such as when a child might roll around on the floor rather than sit up and participate in a group discussion by raising her hand and waiting for a turn. Jenni might have noticed a physical need the child was meeting by lying down, and she did not seem to associate this sort of aberration as a challenge or threat to her authority as the teacher. Similarly, on many occasions during open-ended play times in the classroom, I saw children leave the play areas to which they had been assigned to either drift to where another group was working or to an unoccupied area of the classroom. When she saw a child leave a rambunctious group of children in the kitchen area and wander over to the bookshelf to look at books by himself, she interpreted this as a child seeking a quieter less stimulating experience, and she wordlessly permitted this type of wandering. She told me about teaching in schools where classroom management expectations were less tolerant of non-conforming student behavior, saying, “When I was in another school…I would have little Johnny roaming around and people would come in and say, ‘Make that kid sit down!’ and I’m like, ‘You make him sit down!’ They’re still hearing, they’re still learning!” (interview #1, 11/18/16). Again, her perspective was that these were opportunities to observe children meeting their needs (and an opportunity to witness those needs) rather than an example of children refusing to comply with the expectations.

Social, cognitive, motor, language development. Jenni recognized ways that play supports children in a host of developmental areas, including social development,
cognitive development, motor development, and language development. Play gives children opportunities to practice social skills, such as negotiating turn-taking and impulse-control, in the company of peers, and sociodramatic play also gives children opportunities to act out in role-play-type play scenarios issues from their daily lives of which they seek further understanding. Jenni noticed a difference in the children’s social interactions several months into the school year and described it to me in an interview: “They’re still very impulsive – it’s just the age – but they can stop now and we can say, ‘OK, you speak first, OK, let me hear what you have to say, Alright, how can we come to a resolution’” (interview #2, 4/16/17). Opportunities for open-ended play with peers was, Jenni thought, supporting their social growth.

Children engaged in open-ended play scenarios have the freedom to explore and pursue ideas that they consider compelling or interesting. In a play episode that took place in the block area and was described above, a child used slices of a tree limb, graduated in size, to create a block structure resembling a pyramid; she was independently exploring properties of size and shape in her block play. In another instance I observed outdoors with Jenni’s class, children were rolling large stumps to a central meeting spot in the play yard where Jenni was preparing to hold an outdoor morning circle. When the children initially started moving the stumps, they noticed that there were worms and roly-polies right at the surface of the dirt ground beneath where the wood stumps had been. Although most of the children checked out the wiggling creatures for a few minutes and then joined Jenni’s circle, a few children were unable to redirect their attention onto the morning circle agenda because of their fascination with the worms, and Jenni, tolerating their interest, allowed them to explore. She was willing
to privilege that which the children found interesting over what she had previously planned to talk with them about and to honor the authenticity of their interest in the worms.

Figure 4.6 Outdoor morning meeting

The play materials and opportunities Jenni provided the children in her class required the use of a variety of motor muscles from the fine motor muscles in a child’s fingers and hands to the gross motor muscles required for running and jumping and climbing. She spoke to this issue in an interview with me: “I start to pull out the play dough and things like that to build the strength in their hands, and spending time outside, like I might have a kiddo, you know, jump off of things a lot or crawl – let them crawl down the hallway” (interview #1, 11/18/16). In this quote, Jenni described activities she would find for children who need particular practice or release in one of these areas, and the ways children could interact with materials she had in her classroom demonstrated that she considered this in designing her classroom. For instance, in the kitchen area, children could use child-sized brooms and mops to sweep the floors – which they did, all over the classroom. Alternatively, there were small figurines in the dollhouse area, as
well as crayons, oil pastels, and play dough, which all required the use of one’s fine motor muscles.

Finally, open-ended play and the social interactions it entails support children’s language development, and Jenni was cognizant of this in designing her classroom expectations. Children had many opportunities to communicate via oral language, with and without the mediation of adults. Jenni talked with me about the differences she had noticed in helping children participate in conflict-resolution conversations: “Their vocabulary has increased, because we’re talking and listening” (interview #2, 4/6/17). They independently negotiated the parameters of play scenarios in small and large groups with other peers; these were sometimes supported by adults who children sought out or by circumstantial adult engagement.

_Learning through concrete experiences_. Just as children’s language development is supported by the authentic social experiences of interacting with peers during play, so too are other areas of learning supported by concrete, meaningful, and contextual experiences children have while engaged in play. In Jenni’s class, I observed children who were interested in the insects they had seen and talked about in the classroom carefully look through the weeds and flowers in the garden for butterflies, eventually finding three different varieties. On another occasion, a group of children pulled me over to their raised beds, where the tips of irises they had planted were just poking through, and they jostled to tell me what had happened to prompt the dormant corms into growing. When Jenni showed them how to sew pieces of felt to make a pouch, children excitedly counted their stitches, and many of them worked to determine how many stitches they had completed and how many they thought they had left to go.
Because of the ways in which children were able to further explore experiences that captured their interests, they were intrinsically motivated to learn more. Importantly, Jenni’s classroom gave them the time and space to do so.

**Making children feel successful and confident.** When I asked Jenni in an early interview whether her inclusion of play affected decisions she might make for kids she thought or knew had learning differences, her response included all the children she teaches rather than just the ones she thinks learn differently. She described a child who she thought was delayed in his emotional and language development, which made his social interactions fraught with anxiety and tension. He enjoyed working with pencils and paper which, as she said, “makes him feel confident in his abilities so I just decided to start doing that because…I get so much more done with the others if that one child has something that they feel successful at” (interview #1, 11/18/16). In a different part of the same conversation, we discussed children who exhibit what are commonly referred to as “behavioral problems” but which she and I characterized more as social problems between children or between children and adults. Again, Jenni described her perspective that the way to support children is to find ways for them to have the experience of feeling confident and successful: “I’ve got one that I always hold their hand when we walk down the hallway because that makes them feel successful getting from point A to point B and they need that for transitions because they just don’t like transitions” (interview #1, 11/18/16). I observed her take this child by the hand on many occasions in the hallways of Marion, and never did she do so in a punitive fashion. Rather, she took his hand in a friendly, gentle, cheerful way, as though she looked forward to their walk together at the front of the line to the class’s destination, and he, for his part, judging from the frequent
smile on his face, seemed to enjoy it just as much. In regards to both these scenarios as well as others where children seemed to experience challenges more academic in nature, Jenni said she believed that she could “tell the ones that aren’t ready for it yet. And if I push them too hard too fast, I’m gonna turn them off to any of it” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Jenni’s teaching practices demonstrated that she trusted children to find their own appropriate challenges, and that she thought adults run risks by pushing inauthentic or overly-challenging agendas in the school lives of children.

Figure 4.7 Jenni’s class talks about kindness and love

Recognizing strides they make through the play they enact. In light of all the ways Jenni’s students were supported by her curriculum, including the physical space of her classroom and her use of instructional time, in areas of development and learning, it is important to note that central to Jenni’s practices was her practice of observing, recording, and reflecting on the evolving nature of her students’ play. “Their play is becoming so rich” (observational field notes, 10/10/16), she noted to me two months into the school year. She was referring to the fact that her daily routines and transitions had been established to a degree that she felt allowed her students to engage more fully in the content of their days at school, and that their interactions with one another and the materials she provided them revealed this deeper engagement.
Challenging the perception that play is not valid. Jenni countered the pervasive notion in the standards-based culture of public schooling that play is not valid in the school-based cycle of instruction, learning, and assessment. She argued that including and even centering play in the school curriculum provides children with worthy challenges, is hard work for teachers (and therefore requires more training for teachers), and, because it has been increasingly excluded from school curricula in favor of skill-based direct instruction, it requires understanding and support from parents to be fully appreciated and, perhaps, thereby reintegrated in early childhood curricula.

Challenges of play for children. Unlike traditional instruction, in which children are presented with specific skill-based tasks by their teachers, usually with strict parameters related to materials and time, a curriculum that presents children with opportunities for open-ended play challenges them to take initiative in their interactions with peers, with school materials, and with their use of time. Jenni recognized these challenges in the ways her students responded to the preponderance of play in their daily lives at school. Jenni mused in an early interview that “it’s harder work for the kids to play, it’s harder for them to draw pictures, and communicate what their drawings are about, and even sequencing their own thoughts, because so much is done for them now” (interview #1, 11/18/16). Here, she was referencing the way that traditional instruction does the creating of the learning tasks for children, whereas children in a play-based curriculum must engage to a degree that they are devising (whether they are explicitly aware of it or not) their own learning tasks. Later in the same conversation, Jenni was more specific and identified her perception of the culture of mass media as another challenge to children’s abilities to access their imaginations, using Cinderella as an
example: “...you can tell that story where Cinderella could be anybody, but the kids only see the Disney character or whatever other characters there might be in the stories that you tell. And for them to imagine is so difficult” (interview #1, 11/18/16). One way Jenni helped her students overcome this was through oral storytelling, in which children must rely on their own ability to visualize the story rather than picture book illustrations. Her students’ restless behavior during these story times at the start of the year demonstrated the difficulty they faced listening and attending to stories without a visual aid or prompt. Jenni and I spoke later in the year about aspects of her original Jacaranda Model curriculum that she had retained through the curricular shift that had occurred at Marion, and she said, “They still love stories...they just get quiet, they get still, and all their attention is on me, whether I’m reading it from a storybook or I’m telling them a story” (interview #2, 4/6/17). Her students had grown to look forward to these stories, and Jenni attributed their enjoyment to their improved ability to visualize and imagine.

Jenni recognized the challenges of play in other aspects of her students’ functioning in the classroom. In particular, the inherent demand of social interaction in play can present challenges to children for whom negotiation, compromise, verbal communication, and impulse control are also challenging. These challenges were present for a student Jenni talked about in an interview: “He struggled so much when he was in [my] room because he was my youngest, he really didn’t have this understanding of play and socializing with his peers that the other kids had because he was so immature” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Children learn from the concrete, authentic, and meaningful social experiences that are situated in sociodramatic play, and, in this play, they work hard as they learn to assert their personal needs and wants, listen and respond to the needs
and wants of their peers, and navigate the challenges of coexisting and conflicting play
agendas.

**Challenges of play for teachers.** The challenges teachers face when
implementing a play curriculum alongside district- or state-mandated expectations for
student academic progress are great. Jenni frequently discussed her perception that
planning her play-based curriculum for her students required her to think more creatively,
observe more carefully, and respond more intentionally than she would need to if she was
following a traditional or scripted curriculum. “I think it’s too difficult for most
[teachers] to record what is really happening…so it takes a lot more work, frankly, I feel
like it’s easier to have worksheets and a curriculum that’s scripted out for you to follow”
(interview #1, 11/18/16). Jenni also recognized a challenge in the patience a play-based
curriculum requires of teachers, particularly in mediating children’s social problems: “It
can be really challenging because you feel like you’re working on the same things over
and over again, like turn-taking” (interview #1, 11/18/16). It is laborious to respond
compassionately to conflicts children experience repeatedly throughout their days at
school, but play-based approaches are dedicated to elevating the social aspect of school
curricula, and they require a taxing of the patience of teachers. Finally, Jenni
demonstrated a belief that the physical environment of a classroom or school is important
and requires intentionality. She often bemoaned the ways children were expected to treat
their environment or materials despite not having been taught to meet the given
expectations. For instance, she became frustrated when children at Marion were berated
for snapping branches off new saplings that had been planted in the play yard. “There
wasn’t any understanding of how you can’t just drop things in and not teach” (interview
She wanted more teachers to engage in the hard work of preparing their students, in this case preparing them for how to care for young trees. She wanted teachers to be responsible for this type of uninformed actions of students.

**Teachers need training.** Jenni thought teachers needed specific training in order to gain the understanding to which she referred in the quote about. In one interview, as she talked about new teachers potentially not having strategies for helping students move from using objects for counting in math to using pencils and paper to solve math problems, she articulated her concern: “I don’t know how newer teachers will know how to do it any other way, especially if their don’t get the training [in play-based approaches] that I’ve had” (interview #2, 4/6/17). Jenni perceived new teachers as having been trained to meet mandated academic goals but perhaps not having been trained to see a broader, more holistic view of early childhood education.

In fact, she expressed feelings of a similar deficit in her own training. Jenni held a teaching certificate in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education and had taught in a public preschool for six years before being hired by that school’s principal to teach in the kindergarten program. Kindergarten teachers usually hold a certificate in Elementary Education, which is a different certification and involves training that generally includes a focus on teaching academic content areas, such as early literacy, that preschool teachers do not necessarily experience in their preparation programs. On at least one occasion during a substantial observation I was conducting, Jenni mentioned to me that she was experiencing pressure from her school administration to conduct more explicit instruction (in this case, in phonemic awareness), but that she was not sure how to carry out the
directive because her training was in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education and she had not been taught to implement this type of direct instruction.

**The role of parents, families, and caregivers.** Parent/caregiver understanding plays a final role in what would have supported Jenni’s efforts in the classroom to provide her students with ample time and space for open-ended sociodramatic play. Jenni felt that explaining her approach to parents was a difficult but important responsibility she had as a teacher, and she described to me what she said to a group of parents at the end of the focus school year:

> I want to assure you that I have [prepared the students for first grade]…It’s not going to feel like that in the beginning of the year because you’re going to be told that these assessments are just showing that they don’t have these skill sets, but they do, just give them time. You know, let them play in the dirt. Let them sing songs and catch fireflies and have fun this summer, you know, don’t just focus on the drill drill drill to get them ready for first grade, because it’s only going to counteract what you want the end result to be. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

In this passage from our final interview, her belief in the importance of school-based play in childhood education was evident, and she implored her students’ families to trust in them and their abilities. She felt that her support of children and families was mutually dependent on their support of her curriculum and practices, and that only through a better understanding of one another would this necessary support rise to the surface.

In this section, I presented a portrait of Jenni’s classroom, including a description of the physical space, an overview of key aspects of her use of instructional time, a characterization of her interactions with individual children in her class and her practice of observing children in their play, portrayals of the ways she actively supported her students by providing opportunities for play, and, finally, the critical challenges with which Jenni countered the widely-held perception that children’s play is not valid. In the
next section, I discuss the alternative approaches to education outlined in the Jacaranda Model as well as the tensions between the model implementation and traditional approaches as perceived and navigated by Jenni.

**Jenni and The Jacaranda Model and Marion Elementary School**

*From my perspective, what happened was, they were really excited about the whole idea, and they wanted to just run with it.*

–Jenni, interview #3, 5/28/18

Jenni was a coauthor of the winning proposal for the Schools of Innovation contest that was held in the local urban school district. The contestants were asked to envision a school model that could be implemented in a “low-performing” (state Department of Education terminology) school and, through innovative practices that still aligned with the overall educational goals and mandates outlined by the state Department of Education, address the crises of race and socioeconomic achievement gaps, cyclical poverty, and systemic educational inequity historically related to race and socioeconomics. In subsequent sections, I will present further details of what happened to the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary using public records kept by the Department of Education and the local school district as well as local newspaper accounts that chronicled the implementation and, later, the discarding of the model. In this section, I will triangulate data from interviews with Jenni, data from observational fieldnotes from my visits to her classroom, and data from the Jacaranda Model proposal document itself to portray Jenni’s perspective as the classroom teacher and coauthor on the intent of the model, the implemented curriculum and the eventual shifts in what was permitted in her classroom as the focus year of my study came to a close.
Personal background informing professional interests and teaching practices.

Jenni graduated from college with a Bachelor of Arts in Theater Arts and Dance. She is a white woman, around 40 years old, and characterizes herself as a singer, actor, dancer, and musician. After college, she attained a cosmetology license and worked for several years as a cosmetologist before becoming interested in teaching. Jenni identifies several encounters from her Master of Arts in Teaching program that influenced her future teaching practices. First, she worked with a professor who valued young children’s play and taught Jenni and her classmates through fieldwork experiences at a local residential charity’s playroom to observe and learn from the play of young children. In our first interview describing her background and her interest in children’s play, Jenni said that “that was where I was like, hm, there’s more to this” (interview #1, 11/18/16). At the same time, she had another professor who discussed ways to incorporate natural materials, such as clay and fallen leaves from trees, into the early childhood curriculum. She also demonstrated to Jenni ways that teachers can observe children engaged in authentic experiences and interactions to understand their cognitive development and academic progress. This professor encouraged her students to explore non-traditional teaching approaches that intentionally bring nature and the arts into the classroom, and Jenni began to learn more about alternative educational approaches, such as Montessori, Reggio-Emilia, and Waldorf. She observed in a Reggio-Emilia-inspired early childhood center and was struck by a group of young children’s study of rainbows. Jenni told me that she eventually narrowed her explorations to the Waldorf approach, mainly for the logistical reason that it was the most accessible one to her for geographical and personal reasons. As she said,
The reason I ended up going toward Waldorf was because I had a very good friend who taught at the Waldorf School…and she got me connected with the public school training that happens here…and I was really drawn to it because I’m an artist. (interview #1, 11/18/16)

The Waldorf approach to education, which in Jenni’s view emphasizes the arts, nature, and an understanding of child development and children’s unique needs, resonated with Jenni’s personal and professional history.

**The proposed Jacaranda Model.** The Jacaranda Model proposal states that its most profound goal “is to ensure that the Common Core Standards are taught with intention and fidelity, without compromising the developmental basis of the Waldorf curriculum, allowing students to acquire new skills joyfully and purposefully, when they are naturally ready to do so” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 17). This statement mirrors the intent of the Districts and Schools of Innovation state legislation ([https://education.ky.gov](https://education.ky.gov)), which was to inspire innovative approaches to education to address issues of underperforming schools while also adhering to general benchmarks of student achievement. The proposal describes the traditional Waldorf curriculum as being “grounded in the understanding that young children acquire information in a manner much different than the fully-developed adult” (Forst, et al., p.15) and that instruction must be geared toward the special needs and abilities of young learners.

**Four components.** The proposal identified four key components of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014). First, *Artistic Integration*, characterized as movement, visual art, storytelling, and drama, is described as a vehicle for teachers to use to address academic and behavioral needs of students and is contrasted against the “current ‘sit and get’ style of education that is repeatedly found
to be ineffective with the at-risk population” (p. 1). Time and scheduling would allow for and support this integration in students’ daily lives, and students, in turn, would use the arts as one way of documenting their learning.

Second, *Play with Social Intent*, including play in nature, would give children time and opportunities for self-directed exploration and learning and for strengthening gross and fine motor muscles. This intentionality for time would “allow children to learn to resolve conflict peacefully and teachers to listen to the needs of their students” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 4). Learning would be guided by children’s interests and own explorations rather than by stated objectives from textbooks, and teachers’ roles would be ones of guidance rather than direction.

Third, *Relationships as a Foundation* would manifest in a variety of important ways. The Jacaranda Model proposed including a well-resourced preschool and an eventual middle school so that its students could attend the same school from their preschool years through the 8th grade. Teachers would loop with their classes, teaching the same children for several consecutive school years, so that consistent teacher-student relationships could be foundations for children’s early years. Graduates of the school would be a part of sustained relationships with Marion through opportunities such as tutoring and mentoring programs. Parents and families would be involved and supported by a geographically accessible location of the school, a culture of education and empowerment, and a strong Family Resource Center managed by a coordinator trained particularly in trust and sensitivity and well-versed in local resources and services for families and children. Community partnerships and public engagement, including an Advisory Committee with ambassadors to educate and involve the wider community in
the goals of the Jacaranda Model, would be the final cornerstone in the *Relationships as a Foundation* component.

Finally, *Nutrition and Sustainability* were recognized as issues of equity in that poor nutrition and the lack of a healthful diet puts children in poverty at physical and cognitive disadvantages. Similarly, communities are stronger when they are sustainable, and this component recognizes the need for students to be a part of the sustainability model of the school and the greater community. The Jacaranda proposal sought to promote these ideas first by connecting with local farmers from whom school meals could be sourced, creating and sustaining a school garden cared for by students who would learn to cook the harvested produce, and serving meals in the school family-style with students responsible for some of the preparation and much of the clean-up. These ideas would be advanced further by teaching students to also be “actively educated in sustainability practices, working towards a more ecologically sound and aesthetically pleasing [city], and helping students to become more independent and responsible adults” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 15). This final component of the Jacaranda Model addressed the health and functioning of the students of today as well as the stewards of the future of the community.

*Assessment.* The model proposal discusses two main aspects of assessment. First, it was proposed that student achievement would be measured through authentic, formative assessments that would require “students to demonstrate knowledge on a much higher level of Bloom’s taxonomy that traditional tests” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 19). Further, student assessment information would be “housed, tracked and documented in a three-tier portfolio system” (p. 20), including
growth portfolios (tracking individual growth and progress over time), evaluation portfolios (documenting student progress against established grade-level expectations), and showcase portfolios (samples of best work, providing opportunities for self-reflection, communication about the work process, and peer review). Second, efficacy of the model itself would be tracked by careful observation in coordination with the district’s Data Management and Research Office. Notably, this part of the proposal includes an explicit expectation of longevity by stating that a true understanding of the success of the model would not be available until the first classes of preschoolers graduate from the 8th grade ten years after the Jacaranda Model’s inception.

**Teacher training.** The Jacaranda Model detailed the reasons that teacher training was critical to the success of the model. First, according to the proposal, the very nature of the Waldorf approach is that children lead their learning and teachers facilitate and guide them in this pursuit, but in the case of the Jacaranda Model, teachers were going to be expected to be guiding them toward the stated learning objectives of the Kentucky State Common Core (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014). Teachers, then, would need to be well-versed in the content areas of the Common Core but also trained in teaching methods wherein students initiate learning interests while teachers intentionally provide experiences that guide the learning toward the objectives. “This leaves teachers to be the primary authors of curriculum, and requires a thorough understanding of the methodology” (Forst, J., et al., 2014, p. 21). Demands on teachers in this type of teaching method are high, the model argued, and textbooks and other pre-written materials do not exist to support teachers develop their curriculum.
Second, this model emphasized child development, which is often taught in a cursory way to preservice teachers in favor of courses that focus on subjects such as how to deliver skill-based content to students or how to implement classroom management strategies for large class sizes. Teachers would need a solid understanding of the philosophical, psychological, and practical underpinnings of child development in order to effectively operate under this model. Further, the model emphasizes full integration of the arts in the curricular implementation and would require additional training for teachers who were not already highly trained practitioners and instructors in performing and visual arts.

Third, the Jacaranda Model proposed a comprehensive inclusion of nutritional and sustainability practices, so teachers would “need to be well versed in authentic ways to include environmental stewardship, cooking, and gardening in the science curriculum” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 21). These are three interrelated but very different areas of the study of science for young children, and preparing teachers to effectively and reliably teach all three areas would require significant training.

Fourth, to effectively embrace the objectives in social and emotional development that the Jacaranda model proposes, teachers must “have a thorough understanding of the importance that they play in shaping a child’s social skills through the example they set, the relationships they build, and how they teach students to mediate conflicts” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 21-2). As this requirement indicates, teachers would be responsible for helping children navigate their own social interactions with peers by mediating, as necessary, the compromise and negotiation children
undertake with one another in the school setting. Additionally, they would also be expected to model exemplary relationships with their colleagues for the students to witness. Even the warmest relationships amongst faculty members can be fraught at times due largely to the inherent challenges of teaching, but in the Jacaranda Model teachers would be expected to collegially develop relationships and professionally resolve conflict in ways that would be, at least in some ways, visible to students.

**Issues of equity.** The Jacaranda Model explicitly names equity for learners and families as a core objective in several places throughout the proposal. First and foremost, the Jacaranda Vision Statement (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) declares that the holistic approach to education coupled with intentional relationship building with families and other community members will lead to a more equitable educational start for the school’s children.

Second, the authors of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) saw child nutrition and school sustainability as important issues of equity rather than simply health and environmental concerns. They understood that children who have been poorly fed cannot function physically or mentally as well as their better-nourished peers, and, knowing that the majority of students of Marion Elementary come from homes in poverty, they sought to centralize nutrition and diet in the proposal, which they did by including it as one of the four key components. Gardening and cooking, then, were central to the science curriculum in the proposal, and one of the many planned relationships the authors anticipated building was with local farmers through whom nutritious foods could be provided to students. Similarly, the authors intended meal-times—the planning for, execution of, and cleanup from which would be
driven by students—to be integral to the establishment of school routines and the
strengthening of child-teacher relationships, thereby promoting social and emotional
learning as well.

The authors’ vision was a lasting one, so sustainability was included as an issue of
equity in that students would be taught to look beyond a consumer-driven disposable
culture to see ways even they as children could actively contribute to the conservation
and beautification of the environment, their school, and their communities. In yet another
series of planned community relationships, authors suggested compost dumpsters for
compostable waste and a recycling program for students to help manage. The culture of
sustainability at school was expected to carry over to their lives at home and, later, as
adults, giving students a more empowered and educated sense of ownership over the care
of their neighborhoods and communities.

Third, the district Schools of Innovation contest to which the authors responded
with the proposal for the Jacaranda Model was created to “find new ways of meeting the
needs of traditionally underserved children” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., &
Terranova, A., 2014, p. 25). In particular, the proposal references the local school
district’s Equity Scorecard (https://www.jefferson.kyschools.us) which identifies the
following four elements of the school system that have been targeted for improvement in
the area of equity: Literacy, Climate and Culture, College and Career Readiness, and
Discipline. The authors developed an implementation plan with detailed strategies to
address each of the targeted areas. For instance, in the area of Literacy, one strategy
dictates that children will engage in play opportunities to increase language acquisition
and application in authentic contexts. Strategies in the area of Climate and Culture call
for a welcoming and aesthetically pleasing school environment and for the delay or absence of competitive-minded academics and activities. Strategies in the College and Career Readiness area suggest holistic, ethical, and developmental instruction. Finally, strategies in the area of Discipline reflect an understanding of the connection between children’s emotional needs and their behavioral manifestations as well as the need for strong relationships between teachers, students, and families.

As these examples from throughout the proposed model indicate, issues of equity were at the core of the values and objectives held by the authors of the model. “Students who exist in the double jeopardy of both living and schooling in poverty are at [a] disadvantage in [these] areas…[and] each component of The [Jacaranda] Model has been designed with these students in mind” (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014, p. 25). The model proposed a comprehensive educational solution to meet the intense and pressing needs experienced by children in poverty.

**What happened.** I met Jenni in the summer of 2016, one year after the start of implementation of the Jacaranda Model. Other than a vague awareness of the existence of the school through both friend who taught there and local news reports, I did not know anything about Marion or the model. When Jenni and I met for an informal conversation over coffee while I was in the process of proposing my study to the Institutional Review Board, she was enthusiastic about my interest in her school and her work and upbeat about the new school year ahead. However, as I soon began to learn, in the previous year, the Jacaranda Model’s first, things had not gone as proposed or planned. Most notably, the model had been pulled entirely from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades after Thanksgiving break of the first year. Discipline concerns were cited as a main reason.
Throughout that first year, Jenni and other teachers felt that a second year of the model was in jeopardy despite the indefinite approval that had been granted by the school district two years prior during the planning stages. In our initial meeting and also in her classroom during my first few substantial and interim visits, Jenni herself seemed confident in her practices and about the model going forward, but our interview conversations and my observations at Marion tell a more complex story.

**The proposal versus what happened.** Interviews with Jenni along with my observations in her classroom and at her school revealed many ways that fidelity to the Jacaranda Model was observed and, frequently ruptured. These included the implications of the overall timeline of the implementation of the model itself, as well as the ways in which the four key components of the model were addressed in practice.

Jenni was frustrated with the fact that the Jacaranda Model had been pulled so early in its first year from the three oldest groups of children particularly because she and her coauthors had argued to the state and district officials charged with implementation that there should be a slower roll-out to begin with. She told me in our final interview that the coauthors had suggested implementation in only the early grades, followed by the addition of a pre-Kindergarten as a part of the model, and letting the model “grow” with the students until, as the Jacaranda Model also suggests (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), the school served children in Pre-K through the 8th grade. In fact, Jenni cited the failure to heed this suggestion as a reason the older children were perceived to be having such terrible behavioral issues that the model was pulled from their grades.

> We were three months in, and we had so much resistance from our 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade parents, and they weren’t getting along with administration
in the building, the children were upset, all these teachers that they knew and loved had left, there were all these new people there, and it was just like one hard thing after another. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Demonstrating characteristic empathy for and understanding of children and families, Jenni thought that had the older grades at Marion been left as they were in the former instructional model, resources and energy could have been focused on school implementation and family and community education for younger students, and the extreme resistance they received from the children and families of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades could have been avoided. As she said, “The whole idea of Waldorf education is to take things slow” (interview #3, 5/28/18). She thought that rushing in to implementation at the start of the first year rather than the recommended gradual approach led to the crumbling of the model later on.

Figure 4.8 The sign on the class bathroom door reminding children to wait

Another significant issue related to time was the fact that the model was eliminated in its entirety less than two years after implementation commenced. The state Department of Education conducted an audit of Marion midway through the second year (the year I conducted my study) and, in conjunction with the local school board, decided
to pull the model before the school year was even over. By then, negative attention from
the local press, poor repute in the larger community, and a continued lack of support from
the school’s administrators had dampened morale amongst faculty, and teachers had
begun to take sides: those who hoped to see the Jacaranda Model regain wider support
and those who hoped to return to a traditional approach to educating students. Jenni and
some of her colleagues continued to believe in their advocacy for practices they thought
were best for children and in their efforts in demonstrating to families that their children
were being well-served by their adherence to the model. In our final interview, Jenni
lamented that the model had been so severely limited. “I was feeling really good about
what we were doing…and what was happening there and I thought that we could’ve
probably even made more headway had we had another year. You know, even just three
years” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Jenni and her coauthors had explicitly explained in the
Jacaranda Model proposal that the efficacy of the model would not be evident for about
ten years after the start of implementation, and they had applied for and been granted
waivers from instructional mandates, allowing the teachers to follow the alternative
curriculum plan proposed in the model. Despite these commitments from the district and
state, the model was discontinued, and most faculty members who had been in support of
it found new jobs elsewhere in the school district. Jenni told me she told her principal,
Ms. Bond, that she would stay to teach a third year at Marion, and that “in a very
politically correct and professional way, [she] was encouraged to put schools on [her]
transfer list” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Two years after coming to Marion as a coauthor
and lead teacher in a newly supported educational model, Jenni was urged to leave the
school.
Other aspects of the model were seemingly both honored and ignored. The first key component of the Jacaranda Model was *Artistic Integration* (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), and children went regularly to painting class with another teacher when I was visiting Marion. There they were taught to manage their materials and to observe and implement painting technique, but because they were required to sit in their own individual desks during this time, some children were unable to handle the physical demands, and this sometimes seemed to be viewed as a behavior challenge rather than a developmental one. Jenni incorporated music, song, dance, and movement into much of her time with her students, and there were many materials for art-making in her classroom, including clay and oil pastels along with schoolroom regulars such as crayons, scissors, paper, and pencils. However, in my times observing in her classroom, I rarely if ever saw children have independent access to these to incorporate in their play. Children playing waitress and cook had no pads and pens with which to write their customers’ orders, children pretending to be home alone and scared had no papers with which to write notes to their mothers and fathers, and there was no central location for children wishing to independently draw, color, and write.

The second key component of the model was *Play with Social Intent* (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), and within this component were the expectations that play would happen in a natural setting with natural materials. Outdoor play in the play yard was a prominent part of Jenni’s class’s day throughout the school year, and they did have natural tree logs and stumps along with large supplies of bamboo sticks, but the plans for a natural playground, complete with a rain garden with a water feature, to which Jenni frequently referred, never materialized. She described visiting the
Marion site before the model was implemented and initiating the planning phases in consultation with experts from various local organizations, including a nature preserve and a natural landscaper. “We…walked the grounds and helped in formulating the ideas of how we wanted it to look as a natural play space. We had conversations with people…[who said] there’s never been anything out here but this big grassy field” (interview #3, 5/28/18). The big grassy field remained largely untouched, save for some small saplings and several exuberant flower beds, and children played there, with very few materials to support their play, during the existence of the Jacaranda Model.

The third key component of the model was **Relationships as a Foundation** (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), and my experiences observing at Marion revealed ways that this component was practiced and disregarded in explicit and implicit ways. The coauthors of the model proposed that pre-kindergarten classes be integrated into the school, and although there was an on-site preschool, the children attending it were not a part of the Jacaranda Model. Teachers were also supposed to loop, or move to the next grade level, with their classes, but when I met Jenni she was starting her second year in a row in kindergarten; her students from the year before had moved on to 1st grade without her. Both of these recommendations were made with students’ stability in mind. It was thought that children living in poverty and coping with the inherent instability poverty exerts would benefit from opportunities to establish and maintain strong relationships with teachers, and that these relationships would mitigate stress or anxiety in the school setting.

Relationships between teachers and students were designated in the Jacaranda Model as integral for the modeling and learning of peaceful social skills, for the
continued engagement of students both at Marion and after they had graduated, and for contributing to the breaking of the poverty cycle which the model intended to do. Despite the fact that she had not known her students very long, I observed Jenni going out of her way on a regular basis to demonstrate to children the ways that she cared or thought about them. Similarly, Jenni and her assistant Rose, an African American woman in her fifties who had come to Marion at the start of the implementation of the Jacaranda Model from a background in adult education, projected a relationship of friendliness and warmth. Because of the way the model prescribed kindness and respect toward children both for the sake of being kind and respectful and for the sake of modeling those traits to children, I was often taken aback when I heard the ways other teachers openly spoke to students at Marion. Once, while all three kindergarten classes were playing outside, I watched another teacher bark at a child, “Get over here before I call home” (observational field notes, 9/23/16). I never heard Jenni use hasty threats to elicit positive behavior from children, and the tone and intent of the model’s descriptions of discipline in response to the Equity Scorecard (https://www.jefferson.kyschools.us) would seem to discourage or prohibit this tone of teacher-student interaction (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014). Another time, during a fire drill, once the all-clear had been called and lines of children and faculty were processing back indoors, I saw another teacher walk by a group of giggling 5th graders and hiss, “You all are supposed to be the leaders of the school and you’re just a poor excuse!” (observational field notes, 10/11/16). Again, discipline measures at Marion from the Jacaranda Model emphasized teachers providing children with a caring school culture and modeling exemplary behaviors in their interactions with other teachers and with students; insulting
and demeaning them seemed completely at odds with the authors’ intent. Thus, although
*Relationships as a Foundation* was a principle practiced much of the time by Jenni and
her assistant Rose, this component was disregarded by the system of the school and by
people in several ways.

The final key component of the Jacaranda Model was *Nutrition and Sustainability*
(Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), and just as with the other three
components, I observed this component at Marion in some instances although in many
other instances it was not being fulfilled to fidelity. On the second day of school, and on
other occasions as well, Jenni and Rose took the children out to the school yard by first
walking the perimeter of the school property and having the children point out trash for
them to pick up with gloved hands and put in large plastic bags they had brought with
them. This was not accompanied by a lesson on littering but rather was just a quiet show
of stewardship of the school grounds. We were outside the play yard fence, so the trash
was likely from neighborhood foot traffic as opposed to the school’s students, but
through this action Jenni and Rose demonstrated care for their, environment. This was an
example of the teacher modeling desired behaviors described in the proposal put into
action.

Jenni baked bread with her students in the classroom from time to time, and the
children ate their lunches together in the classroom, seated on cushions on the floor and
using the benches as tables. One morning when I was there, she and I brought the
children in from the play yard and Rose had popped popcorn; she came around to each
child and asked if they would like a sprinkle of powdered butter. The children were
delighted, of course, but not so overly delighted that it seemed that this had not happened
before. There was a daily snack time in the afternoon, and children were supposed to bring their snacks from home. Many students knew to save a piece of fruit from their lunch to eat for snack, and the teachers sometimes reminded them to do so. Sustenance was a part of being in Jenni’s class.

Although these examples describe instances when Jenni honored the Nutrition and Sustainability component of the model, there were aspects of Marion that deviated from the model, too. For instance, children were served regular school lunch according to the general district, state, and federal guidelines as opposed to foods that had been specially prepared and sourced from local farms or a school garden. Students did not participate in the preparation or cleanup of school meals, and the children who sat at the long tables in the lunchroom at mealtimes had individually gotten their food through the lunch line rather than serving themselves family-style with their teachers at their table. Although the kindergarteners ate together in the calm and familiar setting of their classroom, they still had to follow the daily routine of walking through the halls to the cafeteria, waiting in line and choosing their food, and walking back again to their room, this time laden with a tray. As specified in the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), this was indeed a cumbersome routine for them to manage as a group.

As far as the Sustainability part of this component, I never saw students or even adults participating in a composting or recycling program such as those suggested in the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), nor did I ever hear mention any particular focus on renewable energy sources or the conservation of energy. In fact, aside from the trash collecting I described above, and a general attitude
of stewardship that Jenni demonstrated through other similar actions, this part of the component did not seem to be put into practice at all.

As these observations and conversations reveal, the Jacaranda Model was not implemented with fidelity in any comprehensive way. Jenni managed to put into practice many aspects of the proposed model, but the system of the school, the constraints of her administrators, and the practices of at least some of her colleagues prevented full implementation.

**Changes and resistance.** When I visited Marion for the start of my final substantial observation in February, a state audit of the school was looming and two months had passed since my last interim visit. The December holiday break was in part responsible for the long time span, and so too were personal health reasons—Jenni had been home sick from work four different times, and my children’s illnesses had caused me to take time away from my own classroom, restricting the availability I had to take more time away for observing at Marion. By the time I walked back in Jenni’s classroom, changes were immediately evident. There was a new look to the room, including new furniture and décor. Instead of the previously open space, with the central rug and benches, the benches and the rug were up against the walls, and the main floor space was taken up by large circular tables and high plastic chairs. The fact that the tables and chairs were not kindergarten-child-sized contributed to the way they made the room feel overfilled, particularly in comparison to the generous feel it had had before. The soft, pastel alphabet cards and chalk drawings were still hanging where I had last seen them, but now large pieces of chart paper were hanging in some places around the
room. One visually prominent chart showed the numeric symbols for math addition facts.

![Figure 4.9 Symbolic math](image)

When I arrived, morning circle had already begun, and despite being practically on top of one another rather than spread out in a large circle, the children were on task and attentive as they took Jenni’s lead through the physical motions along with two songs. Next, the greeting song gave each child a chance to do his or her own little dance in front of the group. In spite of the very different physical space of the classroom, Jenni seemed to be engaging the children in some of the same routine activities I had seen her perform throughout the fall and early winter.

Our informal conversations during that substantial visit along with what I observed and what she later told me in a formal interview indicated that changes were afoot at Marion, and that the changes were affecting the ways in which Jenni operated, including how she felt about her job there as well as how she used her time with her students. On the other hand, I observed and she told me about ways she was resisting what she felt was an intrusion on the Jacaranda Model, which, after all, had been
approved as the overarching curriculum guide at Marion. As she indignantly put it, “This is what we were told we could do” (interview #2, 4/6/18). While administrators and even colleagues pressured Jenni to take on a more traditional approach in the face of the attention Marion was now getting from state and district officials, she was adamant that she retain practices that to her embodied how children ought to be taught and which had, after all, been explicitly written and approved in the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014).

Jenni told me that she had started conducting formal reading lessons with her students, including time for shared reading, guided reading, and reading groups. “We’re going to have a focus around literacy and we can make it as enjoyable as possible” (interview #2, 4/6/18), she told me, indicating her own distaste for such teacher-directed activities as the ones she felt pressured into leading now. The pressures she felt were not in the abstract. Once, during my final substantial observation period, Jenni told me that that morning, while some children were still situating their belongings in their lockers in the hallway outside the classroom door, the assistant principal had come to her door to say that the school day had started, it was almost 9:05, and her students needed to be in the classroom. Jenni responded that they’d already been in, unpacked their folders, and were out in the hall to put things back in their lockers. According to Jenni, the assistant principal said, “I’m just letting you know – if we get audited on instructional minutes, you need to have those kids in the classroom” (observational field notes, 2/23/17).

Leaving aside the argument that if children do not technically need to be at school until 9 o’clock, they cannot be expected to have necessarily taken care of their arrival duties by that time as well, this scenario is in stark contrast to the natural rhythms of a child’s daily
life that the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) sought to value and even elevate as a means of experiencing and learning practical living skills. Further, the threatening tone of the assistant principal toward Jenni is an example of the disregard of the importance of positive adult relationships called for in the model. According to my observational field notes and my interviews with Jenni, this tone, in fact, characterized most of her experiences at Marion for the rest of the school year.

Jenni recognized an overt threat that a state audit presented, particularly because for reasons unclear to her, auditors would be looking for evidence of direct academic instruction (instead of adherence to the Jacaranda Model). Speaking vaguely about what her literacy lessons entailed, she told me, “There are key things that have to be involved in lessons like those [teacher-led literacy lessons] that individuals who might observe or come and check on like curriculum and learning standards and all of those things are looking for, when they come in” (interview #2, 4/6/17). Jenni felt pressure from state and district officials who were expected to arrive at Marion to conduct the audit, and she felt that that same pressure was being exerted on her by the very administrators under whom she worked and who, Jenni thought, should have been promoting the Jacaranda Model instead of undermining it. Her experiences with some colleagues were similar; once, after she had allowed her class to stay outdoors to play for an entire morning and even brought her materials outdoors to conduct the morning circle in the play yard, I asked her if she had done that often or planned to do it again. She responded, “I have not had the opportunity to do that again. And I think it’s important that I mention why. Not everyone has the same philosophies about being outdoors for children, and finding the worms and you know, letting them hold those, and talking a little bit about them”
(interview #2, 4/6/18). Here, she was talking around the fact that she did not receive support she considered necessary to safely keep children outside from either her assistant teacher nor her other kindergarten teacher colleagues and, lacking that support, in both their ideological backing and their physical presence for supervision purposes, she felt stymied in what she could do with her students outdoors.

Jenni felt the weight of the pressures she experienced both on her own attitude as a teacher as well as on what she considered to be the special and delicate psyches and bodies of the children. She was particularly attuned to not just how the teacher-directed, traditional approach on instruction in which she now engaged affected her students as learners but also how they were able to adjust after having spent the first part of their school year with her in one approach and then having to change to a new, more constraining approach later in the year. In an interview, she told me,

You’ve seen a complete transformation of how I started it at the beginning of the year to now with the tables and the chairs and the benches going to the perimeter of the room and I find it increasingly difficult to get in the standards and also have a movement circle, and telling a story, in the confinement of time, you know. And how much the kids can take.

(interview #2, 4/6/17)

As this passage indicates, Jenni recognized a dual responsibility to the standards she was being pressured to address and to the children she had been charged to teach, and she privileged what she felt she could reasonably expect of her students and herself as their teacher in the face of what she considered to be somewhat irrelevant, intrusive, and unreasonable expectations of teaching “the standards” that were levied on her by her administrators and state and district officials.

Jenni found ways to resist the changes she felt she was being pressured to make in her approach to instruction. For instance, in a passage above, she told me about why she
did not conduct whole group lessons or activities outdoors any longer, but it should be noted that when I observed her doing this in February, it was after the pressures resulting from the anticipated state audit had already commenced. According to my notes from that morning, all three kindergartens had been playing outdoors when I arrived at Marion that day, but after the other two classes went inside, Jenni remained outside with her students for an additional hour and a half. During this time, I noted the children settling into productive and friendly play. Some children safely played sword-fighting with long sticks, one group of children dug holes with their hands, and a group of girls straddled a log in a long row, all facing the same direction, each fixing the hair of the child in front of her while having her own hair done by the child behind. It was a beautiful temperate winter morning – 70 degrees and sunny – and the heat was on inside the school, so Jenni brought the morning message out and taped it to the side of the building. After the meeting, which was largely focused on reading the morning message, was over, a guidance teacher appeared and read two books to the children from whom she elicited varying levels of attentiveness. Afterwards, the children were dismissed from the group and allowed to go play more before we all went inside (observational field notes, 2/23/17). Although this episode occurred in a week of high tension at Marion, Jenni resisted that tension and shielded her students from it, too, by letting them play at great length outdoors. She found other opportunities to resist as well. “We still have morning circle,” she told me (interview #2, 4/6/17), indicating that her daily circle time was a holdover from her implementation of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) rather than a practice condoned by her administrators’ new expectations of Marion’s teachers. In the same interview, she told me:
The other piece of Waldorf education that has stayed is the complete uninterrupted play. When we go outside, I don’t have an agenda, I don’t have you know, we’re gonna play this game, and you know, I don’t do that because that is their time, and… the transformation from the beginning of the school year to now and how they go out there and they just, they know exactly what they want to do, they’ve created their own little games, they’ve created their own little scenarios, they find… materials to dig and they find little seeds and they find little plants and they make a garden, their watching our garden grow, and they’re observing things in the sky or in the neighborhood and things that are changing in the trees and all that stuff. (interview #2, 4/6/17)

Jenni recognized the fact that adhering to what were now holdovers from the Jacaranda Model, she was resisting the practices she was more and more expected to undertake.

This recognition was evident in a later interview:

I always had the pressure to get certain tasks completed as the lead teacher in the kindergarten classroom, but I’m really glad that I stayed true to the fact that, I’m helping these little people figure out who they are and how they work in a group. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

She understood that her superiors at Marion were transforming her curricular expectations as a teacher, and she responded, again and again through the close of the school year, by retaining characteristics from the Jacaranda Model and resisting those of a traditional approach as much as she could.

*Finding a balance, or not.* In the tension between resisting and retaining, Jenni sought most of all to achieve a balance in her teaching practices. She was aware of the many ways that obstacles stood in the way of full implementation of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014). According to our interview conversations and my observational field notes, she worked to mitigate those obstacles in order to implement the model as she had written it and to also fulfill the curricular obligations she felt growing pressure from her administrators to address. She spoke about her attempts to strike this balance and her intermittent failure to do so in our
interviews and she demonstrated them in my observational field notes from my visits to her classroom.

When I asked Jenni near the end of the focus year of my study to talk about the challenges she had faced around implementation of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), she responded, “For two years, there has been constant change and challenges and I feel as an educator I have had to adapt a number of times, which makes it challenging” (interview #2, 4/6/17). Jenni identified teachers as the ones who must carry the burden of the curricular whims of administrators, and admitted that adapting indefinitely is a challenging way to have to operate in the classroom. As she indicated in a subsequent interview, she still considered it her responsibility as the teacher to choose how to implement administrators’ directives: “I just put my little flair in there, you know, here and there…and I was meeting my requirements and I was also sprinkling in the little things that I like to do” (interview #3, 5/28/18). When I observed Jenni introduce a directed literacy lesson in her classroom during my second substantial visit to Marion, I saw this sentiment put into practice. The focus of the lesson was the sound that the letter “S” makes, but rather than launching into the lesson by talking about the letter, she activated their thinking by announcing, “We’re gonna talk about spiders!” (observational field notes, 10/11/16). After singing “Itsy Bitsy Spider” together, she asked the children, “Has anyone had the experience of seeing a spider? Is anyone scared or frightened by spiders?” and she allowed a series of children to talk about their experiences with spiders. She contributed to their stories by providing correct terminology when they faltered. She then moved on to talk about the beginning sound of “spider,” and played a quick game with the kids wherein they had to identify
words she spoke that did or did not also start with the /s/ sound. Finally, she showed the shape of S and directed some kids to the rug to work on writing S and drawing words beginning with that letter, while other children were sent to a table with Rose to make S and s-words out of play dough. In this lesson, the type of which she had been encouraged to start teaching by the literacy coach at Marion, Jenni put in her “flair” as she saw necessary to engage and honor her students and their prior experiences using practices she had written into the Jacaranda Model, including music, movement, and play.

In spite of these and other examples, from Jenni’s experience, a balance between curricular approaches is not always achievable. “Finding a balance is tough. To please the parents, to please the administrators, to please the educational world, and public schools in general. So that’s still something that I struggle with” (interview #2, 4/6/17). In my visits to her classroom, Jenni sometimes reiterated this struggle, such as she did one morning in the play yard during my final substantial visit, saying, “I have assessments I have to run on all the kids!” (observational field notes, 2/22/17). It was on this same visit that she recounted to me all the ways the students were engaging themselves and using their time outdoors in productive, curious, and peaceful ways, clearly referencing her own informal anecdotal records of her students and their work and play, but these assessments were not validated by the officials of her school, district, or state in nearly the same way that standardized summative assessments were. In a conversation on an earlier visit, she grumbled about pressure she was getting from her administrators to teach letter recognition, and she conceptualized a divide between play and academics, signifying her understanding of the two as separate and exclusive aspects of educational experiences—a balance she could not strike. As she said to me later, in
our final interview, “they didn’t pay attention to what we had explained before the school was even put into the building…that it does not mesh with [the state’s standardized tests]. You are not going to see numbers sky-rocket because of this way of educating children” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Jenni attempted to find ways to meet the ever-evolving curricular expectations of her administrators, who were in turn influenced by the district requirements and state mandates, but she did not view these expectations as compatible with her own approaches or the objectives of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014). She felt burdened by these expectations because she did not consider them to be best practices for teachers and children, and she felt a higher duty to fidelity of the Jacaranda Model, which mirrored her own beliefs about education, and the implementation of which was what was supposed to be happening at Marion. As much as she might have tried to allow these conflicting practices to coexist in her classroom, she struggled to find a balance between them.

Relationships

The Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) asserted that relationships would be a foundational piece to the success of implementation. Based on the descriptions in the proposal, I visualized a web of supportive relationships with the model in the middle and other entities, including the state Department of Education, the local school district, Marion administrators, Marion faculty members, Marion students and, finally, their families and community members, surrounding it. Ideally, the model should have been supported by all of these entities, except for the children, who would be recipients of direct support from the model as well as from their families and teachers. Teachers and the model, and families and the model,
would be in relationships of mutual support. The state would support the model and the
district, the district would support the model and school administrators, and the
administrators, in turn, would directly support the model and the teachers. This paradigm
was not at all represented in the fractured relationships to which Jenni referred and which
I observed during my time at Marion.

Figure 4.10 Arrows indicate the directionality of intended support between various

stakeholders connected to the Jacaranda Model

In comparing my interview and observational data with the Jacaranda Model
(Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), a severe lack of support for the
model from the state Department of Education, the local school district officials, the
Marion administrators, and even from the families of Marion students is revealed. This is
significant because it was these entities that lobbied for the Schools and Districts of
Innovation (https://education.ky.gov) to exist, who approved the Jacaranda Model to be
implemented to begin with, who were charged with the direct responsibility of that
implementation, and upon whom, as described in the proposal, the model would depend for mutual support.

Figure 4.11 Fewer arrows depict the fractured support experienced amongst stakeholders connected to the Jacaranda Model

Relationships with families. From the beginning, overt support was not evident from families who had already been attending Marion through the regular student assignment system before the Jacaranda Model was introduced. As Jenni recounted, “We knew after going to the school on a couple of visits that the families didn’t know anything about Waldorf education and they were very resistant of even wanting the model to be implemented at the school” (interview #3, 5/28/18). According to Jenni, officials from the school district along with the authors of the Jacaranda Model visited Marion before the implementation had commenced and held panel discussions, giving families and members of the existing Marion community opportunities to ask questions about the implementation plan. Significantly, because the model called for specific training for
teachers, the teachers already at Marion would not be automatically staying in their jobs at that school, and the departure of familiar school personnel likely added to anxiety about the new model. “[Families] didn’t really understand why… those teachers [couldn’t] stay, and just roll right in [and] we were like, well, they don’t really know anything about the model” (interview #3, 5/28/18). The fact that the Jacaranda Model had been assigned to Marion Elementary, as opposed to Marion community members having sought out a new approach, made it difficult for the huge transition to be viewed as a successful one.

It was just a lot of conflict of understanding from the beginning…we had a lot of new teachers, we had a new counselor, we had a new principal to that school…I think that there wasn’t enough understanding of the methods. There was a lot of misinformation given to families, because families were like, What? My kid’s not gonna read til the 2nd grade! You’re not gonna give them any instruction for foundational skills in literacy?…That was a matter of people talking about Waldorf education that didn’t know anything about it. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Jenni felt they were fighting an uphill battle before the actual implementation process had even fully started, and the fact that parents were suspicious of the model’s teaching methods without having yet learned very much about them was a significant disadvantage for the proponents of the model, particularly since the model itself intended to depend on the success of those relationships.

As the first school year began under the implementation of the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), Jenni started to see improvements in this area. “I really felt like, and a lot of the other teachers did too, that we had built relationships with families, and it was changing” (interview #3, 5/28/18). She described telling parents that their children would be spending a lot of time outdoors, and that she would help dress them appropriately for weather conditions. Indeed, she had
a large shelf by her classroom door that housed rainboots, ponchos, sunhats, and a few extra winter coats, and, depending on the weather, she handed these out to children on their way to the play yard. She told me that families never complained to her about their children having been out in the elements or having gotten their clothes dirty, and Jenni attributed this to the fact that she had had a chance to explain to them at the start of the year why she felt taking the children outdoors was so important. Jenni reflected on what specific actions enabled her to forge relationships with families, many of whom had at first been wary of her and her teaching approach. “It takes a little bit of conversation and openness and communication, and you know…they come around. I was feeling really good” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Jenni genuinely comes across as a warm, open, friendly person, and she demonstrates understanding and caring about other people’s feelings. It seems natural that these characteristics would have helped to put the families of her young students at ease despite the misgivings they may have had about the new model.

These growing relationships Jenni was forging with her own students’ families were not, however, reflected in other classes and grades. Three months in to the model’s implementation, resistance—amongst 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders in the form of behavioral issues their teachers could not manage and amongst their families in the form of continued complaints to the school over curricular concerns—escalated to the point that Marion administrators and school district officials decided to pull the model from those grade levels and revert back to a traditional approach. Jenni herself recognized a lack of alignment between her families and her teaching despite the fact that she felt she had positive overall relationships with parents. She mentioned to me in an informal conversation once, “When [the children] come here [to Marion] there is still a barrier
between school and home” (observational field notes, 9/23/16). Still, she and other teachers, their confidence in the potential of the Jacaranda Model still strong, continued to push forward. “After we made it through that first year we thought, OK, second year…we’ve got some understanding, we’re in a different place now. This is gonna go better…We’re really gonna focus on K-2, just educating families on it” (interview #3, 5/28/18). The magnet coordinator at Marion, who was also a coauthor of the Jacaranda Model, focused her energies on offering workshops and trainings that parents could attend to learn more about the teaching philosophies that informed the methods espoused in the model. Still, she met with resistance in the form of lack of interest and low turnout. According to Jenni, the reputation of the model “had already been tarnished the first year” (interview #3, 5/28/18) and with that, its future amongst families seemed almost destined to fail.

As the second and final school year under the Jacaranda Model came to a close, Jenni still felt deeply personal connections to the families of her students and a genuine investment in the children themselves. She and the children had invited families to come for a demonstration of their circle songs as a way of closing the school year, and at that event, Jenni addressed the parents, saying “I know that you may feel like I haven’t prepared your child for first grade, with the methods that I used. But I want to assure you that I have…they’re going to excel…just trust” (interview #3, 5/28/18). Of course, building families’ trust in the model was a hurdle from the start, but it seemed important to Jenni that the families knew that the children’s future successes were important to her and something she believed in. When Jenni told the group that she would not be returning to Marion the following year, some adults were crying, and that, Jenni told me,
made her feel appreciated, as though some families did realize that she was teaching their children in ways that she really felt competent and confident about.

I found peace in the fact that I built relationships with community members that were of a different race than mine, and who really didn’t trust me in the beginning, and that I had won their respect, and they valued me, as their child’s first teacher, and that was huge. That made me feel really good. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Even though Jenni experienced feelings of defeat by the end of that school year as a result of the Jacaranda Model being pulled from Marion as well as her own departure from the school, the fact that she had, in small ways, accomplished what she had hoped to do through the Jacaranda Model, and that that had been recognized, even to a minor degree, by the families of her students, was rewarding to her because of the way she had intended to centralize these relationships from the start.

**Relationships with community members.** In addition to the intentional relationships that were to be developed within the walls of the school, the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) called for important relationships to be built across many levels of the broader community as well. For instance, faculty and school officials would connect with local farmers both as sources for fresh food and as mentors for Marion’s own garden. Local arborists and naturalists would help the school design and build a natural playground. Administrators from two local institutions connected to Waldorf education would help guide professional development opportunities for Marion teachers, and Marion administrators would help connect families to the many local nonprofit services for which they were eligible but perhaps unaware of. These relationships overall would be characterized by mutual support for Marion, strengthening the school and its potential role for families and
children in the community. The authors of the Jacaranda Model stipulated these relationships in the proposal, and even named many of the contacts with each organization. Jenni continued relationships with some of these contacts, and with others, through her two years of teaching at Marion under the Jacaranda Model, and some of the connections lingered after the model had been pulled. She told me later,

We started farm day...we got all those people there. We did the tie-dying, we got Farmer Steve there, we got the milk truck there...and we are so happy that those children get to experience that and it’s so important for them, but we are a little bitter about it, because we’re like, why does it seem like...this miraculous awesome thing that people that are there now are doing, we developed those things. We developed those relationships. They had arts day again, we started that. We got community artists to come in. The music teacher started it, actually, and she’s no longer there. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

The teachers who supported the Jacaranda Model formed relationships with members of the broader community as the proposal directed that they should. However, after the model was pulled and many of those teachers were no longer in the school, they felt like the relationships they had worked to develop were being exploited by the new faculty members. Jenni felt that the efforts she and her colleagues had made to observe the model with fidelity went unrecognized or, worse, were discouraged, whereas new teachers at Marion were receiving recognition for exposing the students to enriching experiences that had actually been devised by teachers under the Jacaranda Model in attempts to better implement the model.

Relationships with the state Department of Education and the local school district. The support the Jacaranda Model received or did not receive from the state Department of Education and the local school district was particularly significant because of the fact that these two entities are the governing bodies over the state and local
education system and individual schools; ultimately, the existence and maintenance of the Jacaranda Model at Marion was in their hands. In 2012, the state General Assembly took legislative action to create “Districts of Innovation,” which were intended to allow for more local discretion and experimentation in educational approaches. In 2013, the large, urban district in which Marion Elementary is located was named a “District of Innovation,” meaning that the district officials had the legislative authority to name area “Schools of Innovation.” The authors of the Jacaranda Model were the winners of a contest, sponsored by the mayor of the city in which Marion is located and decided by a school board vote, for ideas for Schools of Innovation, which led to the implementation of the model at Marion Elementary. Jenni recounted, “I felt like there was genuine enthusiasm about it, and…that they really wanted it to work” (interview #3, 5/28/18). She and the other authors immediately began collaborating with state and district officials to start planning for implementation, but the collaborative nature seemed faulty, even at first, when officials ignored specific recommendations made by the authors, such as the degree to which the model should be implemented across grade levels. Then, a key official who had been working on the plan since its inception retired unexpectedly. He was replaced by someone who subsequently left and was replaced by yet another official.

The assistant superintendent who started with us and was doing the meetings and things with us before we were even moved into the school, he retired!...And we got a new person and we really felt like we were supported by him, and then he miraculously got placed somewhere else, the year you came in and started observing in my classroom. And we had this whole new person, who was against it from the get go, and was like, ‘We gotta turn this ship around, we gotta get these kids performing at such and such level,’ and I mean it was totally different. So it was just a complete different opinions about whether it was working or not. (interview #3, 5/28/18)
As this passage indicates, levels of support varied and were dependent on who was assigned to work with the authors on the implementation of and on-going sustaining of the Jacaranda Model. The overall effect, though, of multiple changes in leadership undermined the momentum of the implementation as well as the ways the Jacaranda Model itself was supported.

State and district support continued to dwindle as time went on. By the time I met Jenni, at the start of the second year of implementation, the state Department of Education had become overtly concerned about student performance on annual standardized tests at Marion. Jenni compared how she felt during the first year versus the second year in an interview and said, “I feel like it was more supported [last year]. This year I think it’s all been about like we’re under the microscope of the [state] Department of Education and what are we doing that is going to please them or displease them” (interview #2, 4/6/17). This reveals the ways that Jenni and her colleagues were burdened, on top of their regular teaching responsibilities, with constant guesswork regarding what they should and should not be doing in the classroom. To Jenni, it was evidence that “we’ve lost focus on the children, and what their needs are” (interview #2, 4/6/17), which went against the core of the Jacaranda Model’s overarching goals. Later, in a conversation about yet another more recent change in leadership at the district level after the model had been discontinued, Jenni referred to the “missed opportunity…[of having] a whole new person in a leadership role who actually understands our school system and has worked in our district as a principal and as an educator and is so supportive of the arts and music” (interview #3, 5/28/18). From this perspective, it seemed simply circumstantial that the Jacaranda Model had been canceled in the way that
it was, and it heightens the significance of the relationship between the state Department of Education, the local school district, and the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary.

**Relationships with Marion Elementary School administrators.** Jenni indicated to me that her relationships with the administrators at Marion, including the principal and the assistant principal, including the ways in which they related and responded to the Jacaranda Model were extremely frustrating to her. She experienced a lack of support, both for the model, and, by extension, her own work. “I wish that I could be more positive and say that I felt like the program has been supported” (interview #2, 4/6/17). She also felt as though she was not receiving the support teachers need from their administrators and other superiors.

I didn’t feel appreciated by the people that were supposed to be supporting me the most, that were running the school, or…a bigger part of the district, and were really supposed to help us get this thing off and running. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

In addition to feeling unsupported by the school administrators in her work at Marion, Jenni became frustrated at the frequent pushes she received from administrators and curriculum coaches to include traditional instruction in her school day. One morning in particular, she told me about the pressure she was under from her administrators to instruct her students more directly in letter recognition skills, which she did not think were relevant to their current learning (observation field notes, 11/1/16). In general, she felt unclear about what her administrators thought she should be doing.

I don’t feel that I have transparency or clarity about what it is that you expect to see when you come into my classroom….What is the expectation? Do you want me to be doing a play-based learning activity, or do you want me to be using a curriculum model? If I’m gonna use that curriculum model I need some training on it, cause I’ve not used it and I don’t know! (interview #2, 4/6/17)
Jenni understood, through confusion and suspicion from the parents and families of Marion students, through the upheaval at the state and district level that undermined the initial energy of implementation, and through the barrage of requests and even demands from the school administrators, that implementing the Jacaranda Model with fidelity in her classroom was no longer the popular desire amongst the stakeholders of Marion. She did not, however, get comprehensive directives from her superiors about what and how they expected her to be teaching instead. At the end of her second year at Marion, after the decision had already been finalized to pull the model from the school, she was encouraged by Marion’s principal, Ms. Bond, to apply for a transfer away from Marion, which she did.

**Ms. Bond**

Ms. Bond was named by the school district to be the new principal at Marion in the spring of 2015, about six months after Marion had been identified as the future home of the Jacaranda Model (Ross, 2015). My initial contact with Ms. Bond, the white, 50ish, principal of Marion Elementary, was over the summer of 2016, after the end of the first year and before the start of the second year of implementation of the Jacaranda Model. We had a brief exchange wherein I introduced myself and the focus of my research, and explained my interest in talking with her about Marion Elementary, the Jacaranda Model and, generally, play in education. She was responsive although too busy to meet, but she readily gave me her permission to contact Jenni, whose name I had been given by a friend who taught at Marion. I felt encouraged by our exchange, in which she wrote, “You are exploring a timely and important topic. It’s nice to see research validating play” (email correspondence, 7/1/16). Later that month, I wrote her again to say that I
had met with Jenni, and that she was willing to let me conduct a research study situated in her classroom. I gave a broad sketch of the timeline, frequency, and nature of my visits and explained that I was in the beginning stages of applications for permission from the Institutional Review Board as well as the Data Management Center of the school district. She responded, “You are welcome to visit the classroom whenever [Jenni] has agreed to allow it, and other compliance is in order with [the district]. Best wishes with your study” (email correspondence, 7/19/16). For an administrator whom I had not yet met, Ms. Bond seemed extremely positive and supportive of my work. Only through my observations of and conversations with Jenni did I begin to realize that Ms. Bond and I were less aligned on the subject of play in education than I had originally thought. Still, she was welcoming toward me and seemed interested insofar as her other commitments as principal allowed her to be. I was with Jenni during my final substantial visit in February and mentioned to her that I still had not met Ms. Bond in person. Jenni walked me straight to her office and introduced us, and I asked if there might be a time I could come back to interview her. She named a date less than a week away, and I returned at the appointed time to conduct the interview, during which she seemed friendly and willing to talk with me. As with the interviews I conducted with other participants, the protocol I used for my interview with Ms. Bond focused on what experiences in her professional or personal life led her to value the inclusion of play in the classroom, what challenges or tensions was she facing at this time at Marion as a result of the inclusion of play in the curriculum, and in what ways did she view play supporting children in their cognitive or academic development and in their social and emotional development. As
with my other interviews, these open-ended questions led at times in unexpected
directions.

**Meanings and Examples of Play**

My interview with Ms. Bond revealed the ways that she conceptualized play
amongst children in the school setting. Ms. Bond seemed to consider play to be activities
in which children engage when they are not otherwise occupied by teacher-led activities
that focus on predetermined, skill-based instruction, rather than consider play primarily
as a self-initiated means by which children productively engage with and explore the
social and physical worlds in which they live.

**Meanings of play.** I started the interview by explaining that the purpose of my
study was to explore the inclusion of play in the early childhood curriculum as well as
issues of equity, both of which were characteristics that made Marion unique amongst the
other schools in the district. I asked if she would talk about the experiences that led her
to value the inclusion of play. Ms. Bond responded by disputing my reference to play in
the curriculum as being unique to Marion. What I had meant was that I thought including
play as a central component of the curriculum, as it was thus included in the Jacaranda
Model, was unique in the current climate of public education (this seems the case as
evident by the very fact that the model, in including play as a central hallmark
component, was lauded as a School of Innovation). Ms. Bond seemed to misunderstand,
saying,

If I could clarify, because when you said that it’s unique to Marion, in my
previous school, and I don’t know, when you say play maybe we should
make sure we’re clear on terms because in my previous school kids also
had recess only you know, by state we have to call it physical activity
because everything in a school day has to be instructional so we can’t have
non-instructional activities, so even though play can be where the child is
the one who’s kind of leading the activity, the movement, the exploration, as far as definitions, as far as state curriculum, it is physical activity and in my other school we also went out and the kids played and that play may look different as far as in some school and facilities there are, you know, there’s playground equipment, not just swings and ladders and climbing walls but also kick-balls and you know, so with that I think that maybe sometimes people have a perception that educators don’t value play when in fact we’ve kind of been constrained by what we have been allowed to do through the definition. So we have to sometimes get in play through making sure it hits the definitions of vigorous physical activity and that it’s also supervised. (interview #1, 2/27/17)

In this passage, Ms. Bond’s conceptualization of play seems occupied with limiting the definition to policy-related mandates regarding instructional minutes, to more close-ended physical activity relegated to outdoor play equipment or rule-based games, and to that which is specifically supervised by adults.

Ms. Bond also seems to equate children’s play with rest, such as when she said, “I think it’s irresponsible to have a day in which play and rest and just those activities happen in the absence of providing kids with some strong foundational skills in literacy” (interview #1, 2/27/17). This statement indicates a limited view of play, both by comparing it to rest and also by suggesting that the play of young children happens in a vacuum apart from and devoid of the social practices, including literacy practices, of the adults and peers around them.

**Examples of play.** From Ms. Bond’s perspective, the short movement breaks many teachers in traditional and non-traditional educational approaches incorporate into their instructional blocks of time with the intention of giving students a chance to move their bodies and, as is the hope, to refocus their mental energy on the topic at hand are also within the loose purview of the meaning of play.

The difference between play and then also just movement and brain breaks can, you know, we know a lot that kids need to have opportunities to let
things kind of settle and that kids also, you know, can’t be on their bottoms for too long so do we consider that play when the teacher gets everybody on the carpet and get the jiggles out and sing a little song, and then we’re back to work in 5 minutes. (interview #1, 2/27/17)

She listed different play activities in which she saw students engage during their daily outdoor play, or “recess,” time at Marion, including kickball, dodgeball, wandering around the playground, or sitting on bleachers talking to each other (these must have occurred at a different part of the campus than where I would go with Jenni’s class as there were not bleachers or balls where the kindergarteners played). The examples of play Ms. Bond provides here are all notably bound by the arbitrary rules imposed by teacher direction (such as classroom music and movement activities) or peer consensus (such as kickball or dodgeball) and not open-ended activities that follow the imaginative whims or exploratory interests of individual or groups of children.

**Play and the Curriculum**

Ms. Bond sometimes expressed contradictory views on the role of play in the early childhood or elementary curriculum. She said, “I continue to value play but I also value academics so for us the challenge has been finding the appropriate balance of play” (interview #1, 2/27/17). This indicates a conceptualization of a paradigm in which play and academics occur on separate planes within the childhood or school experience. In the passage quoted above in which she named teacher-led music and movement activities as examples of play in the classroom, she used the phrase “back to work,” which sets up a dichotomy between work and play.

**Work and play, working and playing.** Ms. Bond set this dichotomy up several times throughout our interview, such as when she said,
I’ve talked with the staff about it, you know, they call it the ‘tyranny of either/or,’ either we’re doing play or we’re doing academics, when, no, it’s an ‘and also,’ and that we have to make sure that our kids have opportunities to imagine, to play, to explore, and also that they have really direct explicit instruction…They’re both vital, they’re both important, and our challenge is to not let one overshadow the other and to find the balance. (interview #1, 2/27/17)

In this excerpt she seemed to be making space for play and teacher-directed academics to exist together, but to her they are still separate processes, as evidenced by her warning that teachers not let “one overshadow the other.” Further evidence of Ms. Bond’s conceptualization of play and learning as separate and therefore oppositional entities in the classroom is her suggestion that “for kids who are at a disadvantage to think that we’re just gonna hold off and wait leaves too much to chance” (interview #1, 2/27/17). Here, she referenced the students at Marion who, she thought, needed direct instruction at the sacrifice of play opportunities at school, and in fact she suggested that those play opportunities would be the educational equivalent of “holding off and waiting” on actual learning experiences. Ms. Bond did concede that she had seen “an extension of what happened in the classroom into play at times,” such as when she saw “some kids…by the downspout where it was a little bit muddy and they were taking sticks and making irrigation channels because they had heard something about Egyptian water” (interview #1, 2/27/17), but this connection went in only one direction; although she noticed an example of academic content infusing children’s play, she did not seem to recognize ways that play could infuse learning or ways that learning and play could be simultaneous and mutually-supportive processes.

Above all, Ms. Bond seemed to have a limited view of what opportunities for open-ended play had to offer children in terms of their academic growth.
People may have this feeling that we’ve been too head-focused or too academic, and then we swing to the side of being too play-based and I do think that we have an obligation as a public school to ensure that our kindergarten kids are still provided the experiences that will help them have the strong skills in literacy. (interview #1, 2/27/17)

She suggested that if children are engaged in play, then it follows that they are not also having experiences that involve literacy learning.

Distinguishing all those different degrees and levels of play and its benefits, it’s just kind of like having a balanced literacy approach you know, and knowing when and why you do shared reading versus guided reading versus independent and story-telling, I think it’s the same about play – when do we do whole group play, when is it...directed, when is it free, when is it short burst and when is it prolonged, and...what do you mine from those different types of, and when they should occur for…the best benefits, those are all things…that are important things to explore but things that we haven’t really gotten into. (interview #1, 2/27/17)

Ms. Bond suggested that play experiences in the classroom are a part of a quantifiable calculation that, if concocted carefully, has the potential to be just right. Further, until the ingredients are properly vetted, she suggested that it is probably safer to abstain from play altogether.

**The teacher’s role, connecting and managing.** Ms. Bond suggested that play has the potential to be a valid part of a classroom curriculum according to the role the teacher plays. Play in the curriculum supports children academically only “if teachers are intentionally making the bridge” (interview #1, 2/27/17). According to the examples she gave, however, this bridge is so dependent on the teacher that even the play is teacher-led. For instance, she suggests that after teachers have “done phonemic awareness and phonics” (interview #1, 2/27/17), they could take their students out to play and use sticks to make letters or write letters in the mud or find objects in nature to add to letter boxes, such as a rock for the R box. This would actually be more of an extension of a phonics
lesson than an opportunity for play, but it seems to be the type of “play” she thought was necessary for student learning. As Ms. Bond asserts, “learning to read is a very specific code that’s not something like learning to walk that’s gonna happen without instruction” (interview #1, 2/27/17). In this paradigm, children are not to be trusted with their own learning and instead must leave everything, including the connections they might independently be making, up to the teacher.

Whereas the above examples detail the role of teacher management in student learning, Ms. Bond also seemed to conceptualize play as a potential vehicle toward teacher management of student behavior. At Marion, the play yard had no play equipment, and to remedy this without the apparent funding for a jungle gym or other type of structure, Ms. Bond had arranged for truckloads of bamboo sticks to be delivered to the school. These, she told me, were used by the children “to pull and stack and build and it disappears and it gets used inappropriately which is part of also learning and setting boundaries and rules for play and making sure play is safe” (interview #1, 2/27/17). She connected play to the management of children again in our interview when she described her morning routine of joining a few other school administrators on the playground as students arrived at school before the day officially started. The adults would play kickball or dodgeball with the children who were interested (children not interested would sit on the bleachers or wander and talk). She said it would be up to 150 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders that would out there and that since the start of the school year there had been at most three fights between students. She considered this to be a low number and seemed to attribute it to the Jacaranda Model: “A year ago when we first opened with this new program we just had a lot of anger, a lot of fighting, a lot of uh, so
kids have learned to play, and to trust” (interview #1, 2/27/17). She seemed to be suggesting that the Jacaranda Model and the play it afforded children at school might be responsible for more positive behavioral outcomes. Interestingly, the model had been removed from these students’ grades three months into the previous school year so it is unclear exactly how their behavior now might have been affected by the model for play they had experienced for three months a year and a half prior.

Ms. Bond espoused a view of play in which it seemed to be conceptualized as opposite or exclusive of learning, academics, or work. To her, academic content and learning is achievable solely through the direct intervention of a classroom teacher, such as when they “always [know]…what’s the next step for this child, what’s the next step for this child, never to slow things down” (interview #1, 2/27/17), as though teachers can quantify children’s learning in a linear model. In her view, the role of the classroom teacher was critical in order for play to be associated with directed student learning or growth, either in regards to academic work or social and emotional behavior.

The Children and Families of Marion Elementary

I did not directly ask questions about the students and families of Marion, but Ms. Bond wove her descriptions of them into her responses to other questions. For instance, my question about the challenges she may have faced regarding the centering of play within the Jacaranda Model led her to describe statistical socioeconomic factors of the student population in terms both specific to Marion Elementary and generalized to children living in poverty. She spoke at length about student behavior and school disciplinary measures at Marion in response to my question about how she thought opportunities for play supported children’s social and emotional development. Finally, in
response to a question about how she saw parents play roles or voice opinions about the value of play in the Jacaranda Model, she described differences between the families who were assigned to Marion because of where they lived as a part of the regular student assignment system versus the families who sought Marion out because of their interest in the Jacaranda Model and who attended as part of the magnet program at the school.

**Students at Marion and early childhood education.** Ms. Bond told me that 90 percent of Marion’s student population was neighborhood children living in poverty, and her own mention of poverty led her directly into descriptions of achievement gaps and vocabulary deficits she thought characterized Marion’s students. She also referenced the many needs she thought the children at Marion brought to school with them. She told me, “our kids really need, for example, exposure to print and to see books read aloud and to hold books and to understand concepts about print by seeing somebody reading and touching pictures and naming things and labeling things” (interview #1, 2/27/17). She also referenced “trying to shore up all the disparities…and putting in so many protective measures” (interview #1, 2/27/17). To Ms. Bond, it seems that protective measures included direct, measureable, skill-based instruction.

**Marion’s families: two groups.** I asked Ms. Bond what role she saw parents take up in the seeming tension between play and academics at Marion, and she responded by asking me, “When you say parents, do you mean parents who came here because they wanted the program” (interview #1, 2/27/17). I asked her to describe this delineation and wondered if she recognized explicit differences between the hopes and goals of families who came as a part of the magnet model versus those of families who were assigned to Marion as part of the regular school assignment system. She responded, emphatically,
Yes, I do. Yes, I think that we have parents who chose the magnet who have the luxury of being able to say I want to slow down curriculum, I don’t want my child, and these are exact words, ‘I don’t want my child to be challenged,’ versus, families who may not be as vocal and visible but who, for whom some of other folks, people, have spoken who live here in the community, who have said to me, ‘Our children don’t need nor want things slowed down, they need to have things provided that have been absent in the home.’ (interview #1, 2/27/17)

First, Ms. Bond asserted that the families who sought out Marion because of their desire to participate in the Jacaranda Model through the magnet program, as a group, did not want their children to experience challenges at school. Second, Ms. Bond asserted that families who attended Marion because they were assigned to that school through the regular student assignment system, as a group, feel that their homes are lacking particular “things” that they intend to send their students to school to get because they cannot get them in their homes.

Ms. Bond seemed dedicated to the education of the students at Marion, and she told me that she felt “anxious about it…like the whole thing about kids not reading by third grade and the likelihood of dropping out” (interview #1, 2/27/17). Her intentions seemed clearly to be toward the benefit of the children in her school. However, she did not demonstrate a particular affinity nor support for the Jacaranda Model under which Marion’s curriculum was supposed to be operating. This emerged in her descriptions of her conceptualizations of play, and became most evident in her characterizations of the different student groups who attend Marion. “There is a difference in what the people who chose the program want and what sometimes I personally feel the obligation and responsibility to ensure” (interview #1, 2/27/17). This statement distills Ms. Bond’s perception of her role in the education of the students of Marion as an advocate for teacher directed, skill-based instruction at the expense of the curriculum promoted in the
adopted Jacaranda Model. This perception contributed to Ms. Bond’s view that the students and families were strictly demarcated according to their path to Marion, whether it be through the magnet program or the regular student assignment program. Additionally, she viewed her role in the education of each group in a different way.

Carrie

When I began my study at the start of the 2016-17 school year, I sought and received permission from Ms. Bond and Jenni to send home a note with Jenni’s students asking if any parents might be willing to let me interview them. Jenni, who knew or was familiar with many of her students’ families from having taught in the school the year before, also tried to connect me with specific parents she thought might be interested or willing. Unfortunately, no one reached out to me independently as a result of the handout I had had sent home, and the people I contacted directly at Jenni’s suggestion either did not respond to me or indicated that they were too busy to participate. I attribute this to a conglomerate of circumstances. Although I spent a considerable amount of time at Marion in Jenni’s classroom, my substantial visits, when I would spend several full days over the course of a week, only occurred three times throughout that year. My interim visits, when I would visit Marion on isolated days for a few hours in the morning, usually starting at about 9:30 and ending at about 11:30, were more frequent, but on these visits I would miss morning arrival and afternoon dismissal, both of which are times of the day that it is more likely that parents are at a school. Even though the students knew me well as a presence in their classroom, my face was not a familiar one to really any of the students’ families and parents were therefore less inclined to go out of their way to be interviewed. A more significant factor that I believe impeded my ability to convince
parents to participate in my study was that I was another white face amongst many white
teachers teaching in a school of predominantly African American children. Further, my
introduction to them—the note I sent home—announced my affiliation with the local
university. I was an outsider, Other, and official; not a triad that advertised my abilities
as a confidante.

At a small autumn festival held on Marion’s grounds by Jenni and another
kindergarten teacher, I spotted a woman I knew from my graduate studies, a fellow
doctoral student in the same program as me. I approached her and learned that her
daughter was in Jenni’s class; she agreed to be a participant in my study and we met a
few months later for our first of two interviews.

Finding Marion and Starting School

Carrie, a white woman around 40 years old, came to appreciate the inclusion of
play in the early childhood curriculum during her years as a kindergarten teacher and,
later, a preschool teacher, before she began her doctoral studies. Carrie valued the ways
that open-ended play affords children opportunities to engage in relevant problem solving
conversations with one another rather than abstract conversations about conflict that
might occur in the absence of play. She also expressed an appreciation for the ways in
which open-ended play forces children to access their imaginations and initiate their own
activity even when there is not an extrinsic stimulus. Carrie’s professional perspectives
on play in early childhood led her to seek out public schools in her district that might
afford her daughter, Ella, more opportunities for open-ended play than she thought their
assigned neighborhood school would. She learned about Marion and the Jacaranda
Model and visited the school with her husband the year before Ella would enter kindergarten, which was during the first year of implementation of the Jacaranda Model.

Carrie pursued Marion for Ella because she was attracted to the idea that her kindergartener and her peers would spend a lot of time in the open, green play yard that she felt would force children to use their imaginations during their play. From Ella’s previous school experiences, she was accustomed to “open-ended exploration [and]…thoughtful invitations to play” (interview #1, 2/24/17) as well as opportunities to take up inventive literacy practices with teachers and peers. Carrie hoped that these previous school experiences would align with the ones Ella would have at Marion. As Carrie told me, “I didn’t want her to hate school. And I was afraid that that was what was gonna happen if she had to sit at a desk for six hours a day writing on worksheets” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie described experiencing what seemed like common anxiety leading up to when Ella started school; this was particularly heightened by the fact that Marion used a standardized screening tool on incoming kindergarteners, and Carrie vacillated about whether to let Ella submit to the screening or to tell the school they would like to abstain. While Carrie understood the use of the screening tool to be standard procedure in the district, she felt the use of testing on kindergarteners represented a disconnect between the curriculum she had sought out in Marion and how she had expected Ella’s learning to be assessed. In the end, giving in to the realities of entering the public school system, she did not protest the screening, and on some level she seemed to reconcile the coexistence of the intended curricular model at Marion with the norm of testing practices in public schools. “I think there are ways to do things that you quote-unquote ‘need to do’ and still have lots of time for open-ended child-directed
sort of free, unstructured play” (interview #1, 2/24/17). This was due in part to the fact that she felt she and Jenni shared similar values when it came to play in the classroom, and also due to Carrie’s personal confidence in her daughter’s educational outcomes. Because her main concern was that Ella would be in a school setting that allowed her to play and explore, she felt good about Ella being at Marion in spite of some details, such as the initial screening, that were not ideal.

Experiences with the curriculum. Carrie recalled feeling validated in her decision to send Ella to Marion when she picked her up on the first day of school. Ella got in the car and told her mother, “We baked bread and we finger painted and we did all these things and I played in the house corner” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie reported that especially at the start of the year but even up through the time of our first interview, in February of the year of my study, Ella would tell her that her favorite parts of her day were building in the block area, playing in the dramatic play area, or going outside. She brought home many open-ended art projects from school, and up through February still reported playing outside for a lot of her school day. Carrie said she thought Ella was focused in on the parts of her day that offered opportunities to pursue these interests, and this affirmed her decision to send Ella to Marion because these were activities she wanted Ella to be experiencing.

Experiences with the teacher. Carrie said she felt a positive connection with Jenni on a personal and professional level, even later, after experiences at Marion caused this perspective to change. “I really liked her…we could probably be friends” (interview #2, 2/24/17). At first, she knew from information she had received from Jenni about what to expect in terms of curricular decisions as a member of the class that they shared
similar views on early childhood education, and this was confirmed for Carrie in some of the specific interactions Jenni had with Ella. Carrie referenced social and emotional challenges Ella experienced through the start of the year and said, “I feel like [Jenni] has supported [Ella] in working through some of her stuff, and I’m not sure that that would be true in a more formal structured classroom” (interview #1, 2/24/17). In addition to feeling as though Ella was getting support from Jenni as her student, Carrie herself felt supported by Jenni as a Marion parent.

[Jenni] did a home visit for parent teacher conferences [in the fall], and it was hot on the heels of a PTA meeting that I wasn’t able to attend, and…she was just kind of getting me in the loop as a person that, she knows what I value, you know, we have similar values. (interview #1, 2/24/17)

This passage indicates that as a result of a mutual recognition of a similar set of values as they pertained to early childhood education, Carrie felt a certain level of trust in Jenni at the start of the school year. This was affirmed for her by the ways Jenni interacted with Ella in the classroom and in the ways Jenni included Carrie even when Carrie was “out of the loop” due to other obligations. This relationship along with the curricular experiences Ella had and reported to her mother about the goings-on at school made Carrie feel validated in her choice of Marion for Ella.

Changes

Carrie gradually learned of the looming changes at Marion as a result of the state Department of Education’s audit and the Jacaranda Model being pulled, and the information she received came through formal and informal pathways. As far back as when she and her husband toured the school in anticipation of Ella starting kindergarten, she recalled the magnet coordinator explaining to families that the model had been pulled
from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, and that information gave Carrie an initial sense of the
flux that the model, and the school, seemed to be in. Still, she expressed admiration of
the administrators for reassessing a situation they did not think was working well, and
Carrie seemed to feel confident in Marion’s implementation of the Jacaranda Model
going forward into Ella’s start of kindergarten.

![Chart paper showing children how to write the words for their “I See” books](image)

**Figure 4.12 Chart paper showing children how to write the words for their “I See” books**

**Academic school experiences.** A significant and informal way that Carrie
became increasingly aware of the curricular changes afoot at Marion was simply through
her perspective of Ella’s experiences at school. These experiences were evident to Carrie
in the artifacts Ella brought home from school, in the stories Ella shared with her, and in
behaviors Carrie observed Ella enacting at home and hearing about from Jenni. In our
first interview, Carrie told me, “I know that there’s been a shift recently” (interview #1,
2/24/17). Whereas through the fall semester Ella had brought home a folder stuffed with
“tons of art work and very open-ended stuff. It was clear she just had crayons and paper,
and she just had free reign, and now she comes home with lots of tracing-the-dotted-
letters and stuff like that” (interview #1, 2/24/17). The change in the type of work that
Ella brought home indicated to Carrie a probable change in the use of classroom time. She said, “I wonder, too, about direct instruction time, and I just am curious because…she’s coming home with, for lack of a better word, products that sort of show the things that they’ve been working on” (interview #1, 2/24/17). One example of this type of product was “I See” books, which Carrie described to me from having seen Ella’s and which I also saw children working on in Jenni’s room during my final substantial visit. Ella also told Carrie that their school activities had undergone a change. As Carrie recalled in our final interview, “I remember [Ella] saying that they never baked bread anymore and that they didn’t do clay work as much, because they were doing reading and writing and math stuff” (interview #2, 6/20/18). Similarly, Ella eventually noticed a difference in the time she and her classmates were afforded to play outside, and according to Carrie, this change was swift and dramatic. “After that [audit] happened, that was one of the changes that [Ella] noticed was that they used to go outside three times a day and now they go outside maybe two but usually one time a day” (interview #2, 6/20/18). Between the work samples Ella brought home and the stories she reported to her mother, Carrie was aware, as was Ella, that a shift had occurred in the curriculum and instruction practices at Marion.

Figure 4.13 A page from a child’s “I See” book: I see a mouse.
Although indoor, close-ended school activities were not what Carrie had hoped Ella would be exclusively engaged in at school, she recognized a positive side of this work. She told me that when Ella showed her the book she had made, she told her mother that at first she had copied the words that Jenni had written on the board, but then she realized she could do it on her own, and she completed her “I See” book independently. Carrie expressed doubt that Ella would have been that self-motivated in a more traditional environment, and she was pleased that Ella was so clearly and outwardly proud of herself. In a math activity, Ella told her mother that she could recognize all the numbers through 25 but that she needed more work on writing them. Carrie told me, “OK, so here’s this kid who clearly knows she knows what to work on…she’s aware and she set a goal for herself” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Ella brought home sight words to practice, but the sheet said that they were “suggested;” again, Carrie felt good about the degree of choice she thought she and Ella could still exercise over how she participated in school academic work. Carrie thought Ella seemed more independently eager and interested in literacy practices, and she seemed to enjoy opportunities to engage in invented spelling and other writing. As Carrie told me, “I thought, you know, if this is what the sort of paper/pencil work has to look like, I’m super into that, you know? Let’s keep doing this!” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie seemed to appreciate this directed schoolwork more because of the enthusiastic way Ella approached it and the feelings of success and accomplish she seemed to derive from it.
Social and emotional school experiences. Similar to Carrie coming to understand the shifts in Jenni’s instructional practices through the work and stories Ella brought home, so too did she become aware of Ella’s social and emotional school experiences through her own understanding of her child, Ella’s reports of incidences she experienced at school, and Jenni’s phone calls home.

In our first interview, in February of the year I conducted the study, Carrie felt optimistic in her choice of sending Ella to Marion. Part of her motivation in selecting and applying for Marion was that she wanted to be sure that Ella had a positive start to her formal school experiences. “I don’t want her to hate school and I don’t think she does here” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie seemed to think that a child’s positive start would carry over and fuel future perceived and actual success, and she thought, however tentatively, that she had achieved this in choosing Marion. “I feel like if she was sitting at school and they were, ‘Do this, do this, do this,’ she would be like, ‘No.’ And so something is happening there that is not making her feel that way” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie described Ella as having a hot temper and being stubborn. As with other children her age, Carrie said Ella was impulsive and had difficulty with transitions, but that after a settling in period at the start of the year, things seemed to go smoothly for her.
for a while. Although overall, Carrie still seemed to think things felt they were going okay, she reported several other phases in which Ella seemed to have a hard time at school. Troubling instances included Ella having been physically aggressive with other children, and although Carrie did not condone her hitting or kicking her peers, she did differentiate between instigating behavior and retaliatory behavior, indicating that she felt Ella’s aggression had been the latter. In another instance, Ella called Rose, the assistant teacher, “stupid.” Jenni had called Carrie to report this and ask that Carrie and her husband follow up with Ella at home. Carrie told me she was happy to support Jenni and talk with Ella, but in general she did not think talking about that sort of incident at home was very meaningful to children. “I feel like it needs to be in the moment, you know, ‘When you say stupid it hurts my feelings and it makes me feel like we don’t have a good relationship’” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Further, she said, “we talked about that for a long time. But I didn’t punish her for that, because she wasn’t wrong” (interview #2, 6/20/18).

Carrie said she thought adults needed to use de-escalation strategies with Ella, and she was unhappy with the teachers’ handing off of Ella’s social and emotional issues to her and her husband. She expressed to me that she thought these needed to be handled in a more contained way at school, and that the teachers should have been verbally resolving conflicts with the children through identification of children’s feelings and discussion based on those.

By the time we spoke again in our final interview, a year after Ella finished kindergarten, Carrie’s recollections of what she considered the mishandling of Ella’s social and emotional concerns were even more unfavorable. She told me about a time that Jenni had called her the day before the class was supposed to take a field trip and told
her that unless Carrie or her husband would chaperone Ella on the trip, she was not going to permit her to join in because of behavior that Carrie remembered her characterizing as “out of control.” Carrie recalled, “My first response was, ‘Well, tomorrow’s a new day, you’re not even going on a field trip today, so I don’t even understand why I’m having this conversation with you’” (interview #2, 6/20/18). Again, Carrie thought that Ella’s unwanted behaviors should be addressed in the moment, and that consequences that were implemented at a later time (such as the next day) were not going to be optimally effective. Further, Carrie felt that there was the possibility that Jenni was singling her and her husband out amongst the other parents because she knew they had flexibility in their work schedules and obligations that other families may not have had. The overall effect, as far as Carrie was concerned, was more specific to her original apprehensions regarding Ella having a positive start to school. “I was so worried that she would hate school if she had to sit at a desk and do worksheets all day, but she hates school here, too. Like, it wasn’t a good experience for her anyway” (interview #2, 6/20/18). As this excerpt implies, the social, emotional, and behavioral struggles Ella experienced in Jenni’s class seemed to reflect the path of the Jacaranda Model, wherein things seemed worse in these areas of her interactions and experiences as the model was more threatened and eventually pulled, and the negative tone to these colored Carrie’s perception of their family’s general experiences at Marion.

**Carrie’s perspective of what was happening to the Jacaranda Model.** Carrie had a perspective of what was happening at Marion beyond the lens through her daughter’s experiences there. She told me about more formal ways that messages were communicated to families, either from the school or the school district, regarding the
survival of the model. She was aware of practices that were enacted at the school as a part of the Jacaranda Model and as the year went on, she had concerns about what would happen if the model was pulled. She talked about the feelings of uncertainty that infused the culture of the school that year, and about the effects that the pulling of the model had her daughter and on other students at the school. Carrie also voiced frustration with the short amount of time that she felt the model had to prove itself before it was discontinued by the school district.

Communication from the school about the perilous position of the Jacaranda Model. Carrie was made aware from more formal channels than her daughter’s reporting that there were significant shifts happening at Marion. Carrie recalled that in the fall of that year, Jenni had filled her in on a PTA meeting in which Marion’s school administrators had expressed doubt about continuing the model. In February, Jenni mentioned to Carrie that they were preparing to “really [kick] the academics into high gear because [they] have to get them ready for first grade” (interview #1, 2/24/17). This attitude was a far cry from where they started the school year, when children’s interests and motives were honored above predetermined outcomes. Carrie referenced a series of meetings, called by the PTA, the school administrators, and even, she thought, by the district, most or all of which she was unable to attend, in which families, teachers, and administrators and other officials had a forum to talk about the model and the changes. In regards to one of these, which occurred just after the results from the state audit were in, she told me, “I sort of feel like the [parent meeting], and I wasn’t there, but my perception is that [it] was like for show” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Much later, she recalled telling her husband around this same time, “It’s on its way out…they’re going to use the
model as the scapegoat for the low test scores, and whether or not...there was any kind of connection, that was the thing I knew they were gonna say” (interview #2, 6/20/18). By this time, Carrie had a dim view of the integrity of Marion’s implementation of the Jacaranda Model as well as the district’s commitment to it. Later that spring, a letter was sent to families from the state Department of Education confirming that the Jacaranda Model would be discontinued, effective immediately.

Tensions and frustrations. Carrie experienced tensions and frustrations at Marion Elementary as the Jacaranda Model was pulled, and one of these that she described to me was in regards to practices in the wider school community. Carrie was aware of efforts on the part of some school officials, such as the magnet coordinator who was also a coauthor of Jacaranda Model proposal (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014), to involve families in the Jacaranda approach at Marion.

I know that they tried a lot of stuff, like they offered art classes for parents, and stuff. But like in the middle of the school day! Like, who can do that? People have to work, you know? And so, I mean, I guess I appreciate that, the idea of trying to get parents in and involving them and trying to get them to understand, but like, you’re not doing it in the way that’s first of all, culturally responsive or feasible from an economic standpoint. (interview #2, 6/20/18)

Although she recognized that these were attempts to bring families in and help them understand the value of what was happening at Marion, Carrie did not think they took into account the needs of the whole school community in an understanding or realistic way. The failure to include families in a responsive way, she seemed to think, created or heightened the tension between families and the school.

Another tension Carrie spoke about was in regards to instructional practices.

“There’s like a weird tension I think between, well, we’ll kind of get there when we get
there, and we gotta get there now” (interview #1, 2/24/17). This push and pull, which defined Ella’s curricular experiences for much of the year, came to a head near the end of the year when the model was pulled and the attitude of valuing fixed learning objectives prevailed over the valuing of students’ individual learning timelines.

Carrie felt intense frustration with the amount of time the Jacaranda Model was granted before it was pulled. In our first interview, she exclaimed, “It’s not even two years old! It takes time!” (interview #1, 2/24/17). She blamed the high expectations that had been placed the Jacaranda Model, saying, “People expect results from this type of model overnight and it doesn’t work that way when you’re trying to develop [something new]” (interview #1, 2/24/17). In this excerpt, she suggested that the trepidations educators or administrators might feel in taking a risk on a newer approach or model brought on pressure for immediate high performance. Carrie expressed anger over the fact that authors of the Jacaranda Model were not given more of a chance to adjust the approach and try out new methods of implementation, or given a grace period to operate to fidelity to the original proposal. As she said, “It’s still a process and you can’t expect things to just change overnight and be magnificent. It takes time to grow, you have to grow into it” (interview #2, 6/20/18). After the decision had been made, Carrie also expressed frustration at the seemingly hasty way in which the model was discontinued in April of its second year. “I was surprised that it was gonna be a transition in the middle of the school year, and there wasn’t that much school year left” (interview #2, 6/20/18). As she pointed out, educational inconsistency was not productive in any sense, so it seemed as though it would be wiser to contain the shifts in curriculum within a given school year.
Carrie was concerned about how these tensions and other aspects of instability at Marion would affect her daughter’s education going forward. She told me that she worried about the fact that instructional practices had already shifted away from play-based ones and about the longevity of the model she had sought out for Ella. “I fear that they’re gonna abandon the model…that’s where I am right now. And if that’s the case, I don’t know that we’ll stay” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Carrie and her family were making logistical sacrifices to send Ella to Marion, and she did not feel prepared to continue to make those sacrifices in the absence of the curricular model for which they came to Marion. After the model was pulled, Carrie had to come to terms with the fact that regardless of whether they stayed at Marion, Ella would be in a school with a traditional approach to education for the following school year because the school to which they were assigned as a part of the regular school assignment plan and which was close to their house, also had what she considered to be a traditional curricular model. Carrie told me that even though the magnet component to the Jacaranda Model was shut down right away, children like Ella who were attending Marion through the magnet program were permitted to stay not just through the end of the year but on indefinitely. Some families in the magnet program transferred their children out of Marion as soon as the Jacaranda Model was discontinued, but, as Carrie said, “I’m not dealing with a transfer in April” (interview #2, 6/20/18). In our final interview at the end of Ella’s first grade year, for which she attended her regularly assigned school, Carrie expressed general disappointment in Ella’s first two years of school. She felt that they had gone out of their way in hopes of a play- and arts-based curriculum, which they did not feel Ella experienced to the fidelity she should have. In first grade, at her new, more consistently
traditional school, she struggled with reading in ways Carrie thought maybe she would not have if she had been in a program with more directed reading instruction.

We went there [to Marion], hoping that it would be the way it was, and it really wasn’t, it didn’t really turn out to be that way, and to think about, you know, we could have just been miserable in our own neighborhood and been on the level 18 reading level. (interview #2, 6/20/18)

Either way, Carrie and her family were not happy with Ella’s year of kindergarten, and they did not feel that she was well-prepared for first grade. Carrie had been primarily concerned with Ella starting school and liking it, and looking back at the end of her second year of elementary school, and taking into the account the logistical sacrifices and curricular upheaval they had weathered through her first year and the adjustments she was required to make to the instructional practices at her new school through her second year, Carrie felt dismayed and no longer validated in her decision to send Ella to Marion.

Connecting and not connecting with the teacher. Carrie discussed the fact that she and Jenni both valued similar approaches and philosophies when it came to early childhood education, particularly as these related to play in the curriculum. She also expressed to me her feeling that, were they to meet outside the relationship into which they were thrust with one another, as parent and teacher of a child, they would probably become friends. As a teacher herself, Carrie conveyed to me that she felt empathy with Jenni over what she knew must be a difficult position that she was put in within the context of the Jacaranda Model and the transition that happened over the course of the year that Ella was in Jenni’s class.

However, at many times for Carrie over the course of the year that Ella was in Jenni’s class, she felt a strong disconnect from Jenni’s choices in managing and handling children’s behaviors. Carrie described her perception of Jenni’s whole-group classroom
management from times she had visited Ella’s class, and she alluded to Jenni calling attention to or correcting children for “things that [Carrie] would have ignored as a teacher, like, ok, he’s laying on the floor, who cares, like I’m gonna keep doing circle time, I don’t care, like join me or don’t” (interview #2, 6/20/18). Later in the same interview, Carrie suggested that while Jenni’s classroom initially looked different from the rows of tables and chairs or desks one might see in a traditional classroom, Jenni “didn’t really walk the walk…It looked a certain way because we didn’t have desks and we were all laying on the floor, and…that sort of thing, but it was still pretty controlling, not really child led” (interview #2, 6/20/18). Carrie’s perspective was that Jenni managed her students by exerting more control over them rather than less, which went against the tenets of child-directed learning espoused by the Jacaranda Model.

Carrie was perpetually frustrated at what she perceived to be Jenni’s reliance on Carrie handling problems at home that Ella had had at school. She felt Jenni reported on Ella’s behavior at school with an expectation that Carrie do something about it, and Carrie strongly felt behavioral consequences of any kind were more effective delivered in the same moment of the given behavior. She felt Jenni expected her to punish Ella for behaviors that had happened at school.

I told Jenni, all the time, like I will talk with her, but I’m not punishing her for something that happened at school. For one, you already punished her, probably… she’s already gotten nailed for it at school, and for two, it happened eight hours ago by the time we get home, and have dinner and get in a place where we can you know, talk with any kind of [logic]. (interview #2, 6/20/18)

Carrie went on to say that she firmly believed that it was the teacher’s responsibility to handle the problems that happened with her students at school without expecting further recourse to come from students’ parents.
Finally, some of Carrie’s frustrations with Jenni’s classroom management practices stemmed from her thought that the behavioral expectations to which Jenni held Ella were different than how Jenni expected other children in the class to behave. “I don’t mean to imply that she was treating [Ella] unfairly. That’s not what I mean. But I think that I feel like the expectations for her were a little bit different, you know?” (interview #2, 6/20/18). In a previously cited example, wherein Jenni called Carrie and told her that due to Ella’s behavior that morning she or her husband would need to chaperone Ella on the next day’s field trip, Carrie told me she responded by asking, “How many other children’s parents have you called to say that they have to come tomorrow or their kids can’t go” (interview #2, 6/20/18). This response implies an assumption on Carrie’s part that Ella’s behavior was comparable to that of her peers in the class, which may or may not have been the case, but it also teases out what was behind Carrie’s frustrations with Jenni’s phone calls home about Ella, which was that she felt Ella was being held to different expectations than her peers, and she felt that regardless of the expectations, Jenni should have been managing her students’ behaviors in the classroom during the school day.

Carrie told me that by the end of Ella’s kindergarten year, she was so frustrated with everything that had happened over the course of the school year that it was hard to tease out the real roots.

I had a lot of anger, throughout the course of the year and especially at the end of the year, and I directed a lot of that anger at Jenni, and I think some of it she earned…but I also think that she was operating in a system that was doomed to fail and there were things that she was doing that were beyond her control. (interview #2, 6/20/18)
In this passage, Carrie indicates that Jenni, her classroom management practices, and Ella’s classroom experiences that Jenni came to represent, were all jointly responsible for Carrie’s frustrations and even anger, but that also to blame were the rescinding of the Jacaranda Model and the negative influence that had over the culture of Marion Elementary.

**Jenni, the Jacaranda Model, Ms. Bond, Carrie: A Study**

Jenni and her classroom practices and beliefs became the central focus of the study, and the data that represented her experiences in coauthoring and implementing the Jacaranda Model were triangulated by portraits of Ms. Bond and Carrie, through which we can arrive at a clearer understanding of what happened at Marion Elementary through the eyes of teachers and administrators, parents and students. The proposed Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) document itself contextualized the study by foregrounding the realities of what happened at Marion Elementary against the backdrop of the vision of a School of Innovation.

**Issues of Equity**

The intersection of race and class in education is fraught with historical and systemic inequities, and a common thread of issues of equity runs throughout my data from this study. These issues emerged in my interviews with all three adult participants, and field notes documenting my observations reveal them as well. As Carrie said in regards to the population of families at Marion, which was clearly demarcated by race and, by extension, socioeconomic background, “It’s really complicated for a lot of reasons, like, politically and emotionally and intellectually, like it’s just really, it’s a complex thing” (interview #2, 6/20/18). In addition to and perhaps because of the
complexity of these issues, they can elicit overly simplistic, complex, or even
contradictory thoughts and feelings from people attempting to explore, untangle, or
explain them. This also happened in my study, such as when Jenni declared, “The issue
of equity in this [school] district is about class” (observational field notes, 10/11/16) as
though issues this big could be so clearly, cleanly, and easily connected. Another time,
Jenni mused,

I think it’s very evident among a lot of people that we have a lot of schools that are full of black or African American families [whose] parents grew up in the West End, and their children did and then their grandchildren now, and...they’re not always afforded the same opportunities in schools as a lot of our East End schools or other parts of the city. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

In this passage, Jenni alludes to the historical and generational racial segregation of the city in which Marion is located, and she recognizes the overt educational inequities that have arisen as a result of that segregation and the subsequent economic disparities between different parts of town and the different, often separate, groups of people who live there. This passage not only demonstrates that Jenni sees the local issues of inequity as more complex than she stated in the first passage, but also that they are issues that even she as an educator is grappling and coming to terms with.

Issues related to inequities in education that emerged in this study include the silencing of voices from minority or otherwise-disenfranchised groups who were present in the Marion school community but not represented in decision-making processes, educational curricula and instructional practices, and evidence of ways that coded language enabled people to reference these and other issues without having to explicitly use race- or socioeconomic-related wording. These allowed speakers to avoid complex
and, often, uncomfortable conversations, the avoidance of which, along with the use of
masking language practices, can serve to perpetuate the unnamed inequities.

Silenced or Absent Minority Voices

Disenfranchised and minority groups of people are further marginalized when
their voices are silenced in or absent from decision-making processes that affect their
access to opportunities. Absent and silenced voices were a significant factor in this study
first and foremost in regards to the participants. A vast majority of the students and
families at Marion Elementary were African American, lived in the economically
disadvantaged neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school, qualified financially
for free or reduced-price school lunches, and attended Marion because it was their “reside
school” (parlance of the local school district) assigned to them by the school district
student assignment plan, which is based in part on where students live. In spite of the
resounding majority this community represented at Marion, I was not able to secure a
willing participant for this study from this African American community. I have
speculated about the possible reasons for this in other chapters and sections of this
dissertation, but it seems likely that the fact that I was an outsider to the community, a
relatively infrequent presence at their children’s school, and a white person (and so of the
same group who holds powerful political, educational, economic, and social sway in the
larger community) were all factors in people’s unwillingness or disinterest. The absence
of their voices here heightens and contributes further to the silencing of their voices that
occurred during the process of implementation and cancelation of the Jacaranda Model at
their children’s school. This is both problematic for the study but also demonstrative of
the prevailing institutional inequities that the educational system perpetuates.
The local school district’s decision, after having decided to accept the Jacaranda Model proposal, to implement it at Marion Elementary was based on Marion’s label as a “failing school,” which is the state Department of Education’s way of identifying the schools with the very lowest standardized testing scores. The logic was that new “Schools of Innovation” could help turn around failing schools through their innovative philosophies, approaches, and practices. What the state Department of Education and local school district seemed to fail to take into account was the fact that Marion was an existing school community, not a blank slate. As such, the community was seemingly left out of the decision-making processes that led to Marion housing the Jacaranda Model. As Carrie said, “That just seems like a rookie mistake, like not to say let’s do a survey of the neighborhood and see what they thing about this or, you know, like something to try to gauge some sort of feeling from the community” (interview #2, 6/20/18). If it was a mistake, it indicates, as Carrie suggests, inexperience and incompetence. However, it seems more likely to have been thinly veiled oppressive forces of an inequitable educational system at play, excluding minority voices to the benefit or, at the very least, maintenance of the system. As Ms. Bond wondered, “Whose voices are we honoring in our decision making when we are determining next steps?” (interview #1, 2/27/17). After the model had been discontinued but while Ella still attended Marion, Carrie ran into an African American woman she recognized as another parent from Marion. They chatted for a few minutes, and Carrie told me,

She said to me, ‘You know, they decided to do this without any buy-in from the community. So then, when our kids didn’t do what they wanted them to do, they were upset about it.’…And she said, ‘Well, did it do what you wanted for your kid?’ And I said, ‘No.’ And she said, ‘Well, it didn’t do what we wanted for our kids, either. So no one was happy.’ So…that really was hard to hear. And think about. (interview #2, 6/20/18)
This encounter with a fellow parent from Marion proved to be a pivotal moment for Carrie; it still weighed heavy on her mind when she told me about it over a year after it had happened, and it changed the way she thought about the school she had so eagerly sought out for her daughter. She realized that aside from the eventual lack of fidelity with which the model was implemented and immediacy with which it was finally canceled, she had stood to gain from what she considered to be an educational opportunity that was part of a system actively disregarding the opinions and wants of a significant group of stakeholders. She was troubled by this paradigm for a long time.

Jenni also expressed concerns and misgivings about the way in which the Jacaranda Model was assigned to and implemented in Marion Elementary. In our final interview, she told me about the intentions she had shared with her coauthors of the model proposal:

We didn’t ever want to make it feel like, here we are, these four white women going in to this predominantly black neighborhood and we’re gonna, like, save the children, you know, like save the neighborhood. We did not ever want that to be the idea. Because we wanted everybody to know we were placed there. It was not even our idea or intention to be there. Not that we didn’t think they were deserving of it but that we thought we would get the reaction that we did. You know, and the way that things happened…it wasn’t successful because it wasn’t allowed to be successful, is really kind of what it boils down to. It didn’t feel like it was allowed to be successful. [And it’s] sad. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Jenni recognized the ways in which the choices to implement the model, to do so at Marion, to do so without fidelity or integrity to the objective of the proposal, and to eventually fully discontinue it were fraught with tensions regarding the lack of representation that the families of Marion experienced. These decisions were made by
the district and the state without community voice, and the way they were made contributed to what she viewed as the denial of a chance for success.

The idea that certain groups have opportunities to voice their opinions with purpose and recognition while other groups are silenced or ignored can manifest on smaller scales, too, and I observed this happening to the students in Jenni’s class. A resource teacher came to read a story one day while I was conducting an interim observation and while Jenni was out of the room. It was clear to me from the children’s behavior while she read the story – rolling around on the floor, whispering and talking to one another, getting up to use the bathroom – that they were not particularly engaged in the story. This was evident after she finished reading and began calling on children to hear their questions and comments; most of the children did not seem able to make pertinent connections, indicating that perhaps they had not understood the story. One child, who was one of the four white children out of 20 in the class, made a relevant remark. The teacher responded to all the children she called on before and after that child by saying, “OK, interesting,” but for the child who’s comment was more on target of what the teacher was expecting or hoping for, she revoiced the child’s entire remark so everyone would be sure to hear it. This inequitable practice of treating some students’ work or ideas one way (responding with “OK, interesting) and other students’ work or ideas in another, more outwardly approving way (such as revoicing) would would have the negative effect of indicating to the children that that child’s comment was more valuable to the teacher and more “correct” than theirs was. It also would have the (likely unintended) learning consequence of drawing students’ attention on to the remark of that one child, rather than supporting them through their own thinking to a clearer
understanding of the topic. Either way, in this example, the voice of one student was clearly and decisively privileged over the voices of all the others.

**Curriculum and Instructional Practices**

Jenni and Carrie had similar views on education, including a firm belief in play as an important and critical aspect of children’s learning and as a crucial component to any early childhood curriculum, and they both supported the instructional practices espoused in the Jacaranda Model, including the centrality of play, nature, and the arts, as well as trust in children to help determine the focus and pace of their learning. They were also both deeply disappointed in their experiences at Marion under the Jacaranda Model, and aside from their personal disappointments, they both felt that injustices had been committed in the implementation of the model at the state, district, and school levels. However, the primary concerns each voiced about those injustices had nuanced differences.

Carrie articulated her concerns as being on behalf of families’ voices being heard in the community. She said, “If we’re gonna talk about equity let’s talk about Progressive Education for ALL children…but also we can’t just, you know, we can’t just go in and, like, impose it, you know?” (interview #2, 6/20/18). As discussed in the previous section, Carrie was newly aware of the way in which members of the African American neighborhoods that had made up the pre-Jacaranda Marion community had been excluded from planning or implementation decision-making processes, and she seemed to feel that even though she was a strong proponent of and believer in Progressive Education (which espouses many of the same ideas as the Jacaranda Model in terms of child development and learning), she felt that overall it was a mistake on the
part of the district and state to impose a new educational model on the community without seeking input from that community first.

Jenni, on the other hand, seemed to think that with a slower roll-out and the careful building of trusting relationships and a more informative approach, the feelings of imposition could have been avoided. She seemed instead primarily concerned with what she considered to be a lack of understanding on the part of state, district, and school officials of what educational practices are best for children. In my final interview with Jenni, she said,

> There was no understanding or belief that it’s for any child to learn in nature, to have experiences in art to help them learn through the arts, that was not, it wasn’t understood. Among the people that were supposed to be supporting us. And so then when they didn’t pay attention to what we had explained before the school was even put into the building was that it does not mesh with K-Prep. (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Jenni also seemed to think it was unethical to take a vulnerable population of children, those who experienced instability in their home lives because of issues of poverty, and to deny them the time and space to explore, grow, and learn through authentic play experiences. In an informal conversation she and I had during one of my substantial visits, Jenni referenced the fact that teacher-directed instruction and predetermined objectives and outcomes were mandated in schools like Marion that were considered to be low-performing and were attended mainly by children living in poverty, while middle-class and affluent families seemed to seek out programs that afforded children thoughtful and intentional opportunities to play (as did the mostly white families who applied to send their children to Marion through the district magnet program—they were seeking out the very curriculum that the administrators were undermining). She fumed, “Why do families that have a lower income need more rigor?! Why don’t they need what high
socioeconomic families need? Kindness and compassion, right and wrong, respect for others’ feelings, space?” (observational field notes, 10/11/16). Jenni wanted the children at Marion to be afforded the same educational opportunities that the families of their more affluent peers were seeking out. She did not understand how what she saw as the rigorous approach of skills-based instruction would serve any child well, especially ones who were socially, emotionally, or academically fragile as a result of their family’s tenuous socioeconomic background.

Jenni also talked about ways that specific curricular content and teaching practices related to issues of racial and socioeconomic equity. She had noticed that culturally responsive academic content had seemed to make a positive difference in her students’ engagement and motivation. Jenni had observed that her students enjoyed stories about real people, and during Black History Month, Jenni had introduced a series of nonfiction and biographical books about historical African American figures. She wondered, “Why is just a month? You know, why isn’t it part of our history? Why isn’t it part of every day conversation?” (interview #2, 4/6/17). She told me that thinking about what interested her students along with how this historical canon should not be limited to a month but rather incorporated into regular content had activated her thinking into planning for the following school year and how she could engage her students in the future.

Finally, Jenni spoke frequently about her frustration over being pressured to reduce the amount of time to play her students had. She attributed this pressure to a variety of causes, but she tried to stand firm in her belief that children should get to play. “Every child has the right to have a safe place to play, you know? …Seeing black
children rough-housing and rolling around doesn’t automatically mean that they’re fighting or that there’s a violent act about to happen. They’re being children” (interview #3, 5/28/18). The implied extension of this is that there is no need to exert undue control, through teaching practices such as teacher-directed instruction and predetermined outcomes, over children of color who were, after all, being children.

Coded Language: The Community, the Resides, and the Magnets

There emerged in the data the use of shorthand terms for generalizing the racial profile of Marion’s students without explicitly mentioning racial terms. Most prominent among these were the terms reside or community families, which generally referred to African American families living below the poverty line in the economically disadvantaged neighborhoods immediately surrounding Marion Elementary, and magnet families which generally referred to the middle-class white families whose families sent them to Marion as a part of the magnet program and who lived elsewhere in this comparatively segregated city. Of the adult participants in this study, Carrie used these terms most frequently, whereas Jenni and Ms. Bond were more accurately descriptive in their references to different groups within the school community. It is important to disclose that I found myself using these encoded terms as well, if not vocally in recorded interview transcripts then occasionally in my observational field notes and researcher’s memos and in my thinking about the makeup of the Marion Elementary School community.

These code words were used in contexts such as the following, wherein Carrie describes a conversation she was a part of near the end of Ella’s kindergarten year, after the model had been pulled, when she and other white parents of children attending
Marion as a part of the magnet program discussed where their children would likely go to school the following year: “It was, like, all the magnet kids” (interview #2, 6/20/18). That they would send their children to a different school was a seemingly foregone conclusion; families who participated in the magnet program did not see Marion as a desirable school once it was stripped of the Jacaranda Model. In another example of the use of shorthand codes for avoiding the naming of race, Carrie told me, “Now, of course, thinking about the perspective of the people in the reside, in the community, that totally changes the way that I think, I feel about it” (interview #2, 6/20/18). In this excerpt, Carrie is acknowledging the ways in which her thoughts on the Jacaranda Model at Marion evolved after running into the African American mother of a Marion student who expressed her frustration about the model being implemented without any voice from the school community attending Marion before the model was adopted. In a final example, Carrie names the magnet families as white but still uses the term neighborhood families to refer to the African American families who lived around Marion:

So all the kids that left were, let’s be honest…all the white middle-class kids that, you know, could get there on their own, and who, I mean, all the parents, I wasn’t involved in the PTA or anything because, whatever, I just wasn’t. But you know, and it’s sad to say that the neighborhood families weren’t either. I don’t mean to imply that but there were a lot of the same people, like, doing stuff all the time. (interview #2, 6/20/18)

In this interesting excerpt, Carrie uses racial terms to identify white families but coded language to identify black families, all while hesitantly naming who participated in the PTA. In this, she shrugs off the fact that she did not participate in the PTA by saying “whatever,” in a “who cares” kind of way, and at the same time she draws attention to what she seems to be suggesting is a significant fact that the neighborhood (read: black) families also did not participate in the PTA.
The educational institution, like other public systems, is laden with complex inequities that people deliberately and inadvertently work to disrupt or perpetuate. Some of these inequities or evidence of them emerged in the data from this study, including the silencing of already disenfranchised stakeholder voices, curricula implementation and instructional practices, and the use of coded language that allowed speakers to avoid talking directly about race.

**Jenni’s Journey**

*I was like, OK, I did have an impact, you know, as much as it feels like I don’t right now, I did. And that helped in the healing process. But it’s been long.*

–Jenni, interview #3, 5/28/18

The course of the Jacaranda Model, from its inception as a proposed educational plan, its implementation to, at first, great local fanfare and later, to widespread disapproval, its undermining by the decisions and actions of Marion school administrators and local school officials, and, finally, its cancellation by the state Department of Education, created a significant emotional burden on Jenni, one of the authors of the original proposal. In addition to the negative emotions she coped with, it affected her professional confidence and her attitudes toward being a kindergarten teacher. This started while she was teaching at Marion under the Jacaranda Model and continued well into the school year after the model had been discontinued and she had begun a new job elsewhere in the district, three years after she and the other authors proposed the model.

**Emotional Toll**
Jenni reported to me as early as September during the second year of implementation of the Jacaranda Model that she felt overwhelmed and not cared for at Marion. She said she was struggling to meet standards and also provide opportunities for children to play and that she was worried about squashing children’s spirits and about children being corrected for acting like children. Later that year, in April, she told me, “I’ve been through a lot of emotions recently…I just can’t fight it anymore. I mean, I’m exhausted” (interview #2, 4/6/17). This was just before the announcement was made that the model was being abandoned, and Jenni recalled those same feelings of fighting against the forces that canceled the model over a year later in our final interview:

I had invested so much of myself into the project…and I just got to a point where I was like, ‘I am not a fighter. And I feel like I’m fighting, for something that I really believe in…and I want to have control, I want this to work,’ and then I finally got to a point where I was like, ‘OK, I have to be the authority and the light and the guide for kids, so I can’t have this mode of like fight, fight, fight, fight, fight, fight, because what am I modeling for them?’ (interview #3, 5/28/18)

Jenni felt that the negative emotions she was experiencing were so intense that they were infusing not only her attitude at work but also her ability to function as the leader of her classroom in the way she thought she should.

Even later, during the following school year, when Jenni was no longer teaching at Marion and had a new job in a different school that she enjoyed, she recalled being hit with sudden pangs of anger about what had happened to the Jacaranda Model. “I was just like, mad as all get-out, and I was like, this stinks! Why am I here right now and not at [Marion], doing what I was doing, you know, what I had worked so hard to do!” (interview #3, 5/28/18). The model, it seemed, had felt like an extension of her
professional self, and, as such, it was painful to her to remember the investment she had made in the success of the Jacaranda Model and to feel that her efforts had been futile.

**Being a Teacher**

The eventual failure of the Jacaranda Model, including the ways its potential success was undermined by the school and district officials, affected the way Jenni thought of herself as a teacher. During the year of my study, she started to consider looking for another job. She told me that she thought being a special area teacher, such as an Arts and Humanities teacher, might be a better fit for her, or that perhaps leaving the environment of Marion might reinvigorate her enthusiasm for teaching. “I’m just gonna take action and…put in for a transfer and if something happens I can go and have an interview and talk…about what I do and how I’m excited about education for young children” (interview #2, 4/6/17). At the same time, she wondered if this would be a solution after all, if uprooting herself from the model she had so carefully crafted would help her feel any better. As she said to me, “I came here with the intention of being here for the rest of my career, and to think that I might have to…move somewhere else, and build relationships again, does not sound exciting” (interview #2, 4/6/17). In the end, Jenni did not need to debate the issue with herself, because after the model was formally discontinued, Ms. Bond encouraged her to apply for a transfer within the district and to not return to Marion.

Jenni applied for a transfer to teach at the preschool level, which she had done for six years before moving to kindergarten at her previous school. “I just had felt so beaten that I was not skilled enough to teach kindergarten, [that] was really how I felt in my heart” (interview #3, 5/28/18). As time went on through the summer following the
cancelation of the Jacaranda Model, and Jenni did not receive word on a new job, she worried about the possibility of having to return to Marion and work in a school where she knew she was not wanted. At the same time, she was particular about where she thought she wanted to go, too, and reported an incident to me wherein she deliberately blew a job interview in a school after getting a negative feeling that she was not able to articulate or pinpoint the root of just by walking in the halls. Happily, she ended up being hired as a preschool teacher in a school in which she felt comfortable and welcomed.

Moving On

Jenni demonstrated a capacity for seeing through the emotions of sadness, frustration, and anger she experienced to find positivity, and this seemed to help her move on from the emotional toll of the Jacaranda Model. For instance, even in the midst of feeling that she was fighting all the time for the model’s integrity and success at Marion, she recalled halting that attitude by reminding herself that she needed to be “the authority and the light and the guide” (interview #3, 5/28/18) for her students and embody a different way of being. She recalled to me that the model being pulled “felt like a death” (interview #3, 5/28/18). In the final days of the school year at Marion Jenni had invited families to the classroom for a culminating event wherein children demonstrated some of their routine class activities, and to Jenni, the gathering felt funereal. As with a funeral, people cried and the emotions Jenni experienced that day seemed to have a cathartic effect.

Jenni spent the summer after her second and final year at Marion caring for two small children along with her own 5- and 7-year-olds, and she felt that the time she spent
with this small group, along with work she did with children at a local nature preserve, was “so nurturing for me…it was just an awesome summer” (interview #3, 5/28/18). She indicated that it helped prepare her, mentally and emotionally, to start fresh at a new school, which she did that fall. Even though she continued to feel frustrated about what had happened with the Jacaranda Model, she became close with a new colleague in her new school who was understanding and who provided her with emotional and professional support.

In the end, Jenni reported to me that she was coping with the failure of the Jacaranda Model by thinking that perhaps the model influenced attitudes at the local school district, which had undergone its own upheaval and reorganization since the end of the Jacaranda Model. “Maybe I had an impact [on] the district at large, because everybody started to think about things differently…even though that dream didn’t come to fruition, it’s had an impact on a larger scale, and I’m really excited about that” (interview #3, 5/28/18). This narrative, rooted in the reality of a school district in flux and her firm belief in the importance of play in the school curriculum, and potentially contributing to the momentum toward innovation she had hoped to create in the Jacaranda Model, preserves the relevance of Jenni’s proposal and her own daily work as a teacher. Despite the toll of the emotional journey Jenni undertook as a result of her having authored the Jacaranda Model proposal, the strength of her beliefs in the teaching practices the model espoused helped her interpret her experiences in a positive light, preserving her enthusiasm as a teacher and her beliefs connected to play in the early childhood curriculum.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of literacy development in a kindergarten classroom in which the curriculum focused on open-ended play in order to understand more about the role of play in children’s school-based literacy learning. Additionally, I sought to explore issues of equity and access in schooling in order to understand more about how centering play in the kindergarten curriculum affects children, teachers, families, and schools. The research questions that guided this study are:

• What are the characteristics of a classroom in which play has been centered in the curriculum?
  ▪ How is literacy learning a part of this environment?

• What affects does centering play have on…
  ▪ the social practices in the classroom community?
  ▪ on marginalized learners?

• More broadly, how does play in school involve issues of equity and justice?
  ▪ Who gets to play?

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature
The review of literature in Chapter Two historically contextualizes the current landscape in early childhood education wherein objectives, measures, and standards have pushed aside or replaced children’s opportunities for open-ended play with peers. One important term is *play*, the definition of which eludes consensus but which in this context refers to the means through which children express themselves, reflect on experiences, and make meaning (Vygotsky 1978), and which can also be interpreted as an individual means of assuming subversive identities or positions of power (Bakhtin, 1981; Gates, 1988). Another important term is *literacies*, which also has a range of definitions and which for the purposes here I interpret as semiotic social practices: using signs systems for communication. Researchers (Rowe, 2008; Gee, 2001; Finn, 2009; Bakhtin) assert that the communicative meaning is tied to the culture and context of the user. Additionally, *identity, agency, power,* and *discourse* are other important terms that were defined and discussed in Chapter Two.

This study is situated in the theory of critical socioculturalism, which is rooted in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism. This theory asserts that the internalization of higher level thinking processes stems from external interactions which for young children occur through sociodramatic play. Moll’s sociocultural theory contributes to this that social and cultural histories also influence learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The concept of Funds of Knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) describes ways in which children’s and families’ literacy practices are not valued in the school setting, causing already-marginalized learners to be considered novices in their school-based literacy practices. Schooling experiences alienate students when their funds of knowledge are ignored or unrecognized (Moll et al., 1992; Larson, 2006). On
the other hand, educational opportunities for success widen and multiply when children can enact their funds of knowledge.

Identity, agency, and power are relevant to school experiences (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) in that learning can be considered a series of shifts in identity, mediated by social, cultural, historical, and personal backgrounds (Gee; Moje & Lewis, 2007). Motivation to participate in a group is heightened when people feel they have agency over their actions, so agentive learners have enriched and enriching school experiences. Power is produced as a result of social relationships (Moje & Lewis, 2007), and it is sustained by micropractices of power that can be enacted or disrupted in schools depending on, for instance, how families are involved, what the design of the curricula is, and how teachers mediate student interactions. Lewis, Enciso, & Moje (2007) propose a critical sociocultural perspective, which includes the lenses of identity, agency, and power and gives researchers a more rigorous way of studying literacy learning.

In addition to the ways classroom practices can affect identity, agency, and power, power is reproduced at the institutional and societal levels as well. Bourdieu (2000) writes about the projection of dominance via educational curricula, and Foucault (1995/1975) asserts that educational institutions are a means by which marginalized people are controlled. To disrupt these, Freire (2000/1970) calls for a critical awakening amongst oppressed people to fuel societal changes.

Play and literacy have a special relationship in the literature. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that literacy practices and play each become independent sign systems through children’s social and cognitive development. Wohlwend (2011) theorizes play as a literacy and asserts the play/literacy nexus, where practices support and strengthen each
Vygotsky and Dewey (1990/1932) emphasize that learning must be meaningful and relevant to students to retain their authentic engagement. Children approach school with a special fund of knowledge (Corsaro, 1985)—the capacity and interest in meaningful, relevant sociodramatic play—and supporting young students in the play/literacy nexus (Wohlwend) at school is one way to promote inclusivity and empowerment in the classroom. In this, it is critical that teachers are prepared to facilitate and mediate play experiences, and that they intentionally maintain the vitality of the play/literacy nexus in the classroom setting for the benefit of all learners.

**Methodology**

This study was designed as an ethnographic study because I sought to understand the practices of a group of people (Creswell, 2013). Research was conducted in three stages: stage one included purposeful sampling and gaining entry; stage two involve ethnographic data collection through observations and interviews and initial phases of grounded theory analysis; and stage three involved further iterative data collection and analysis. The research site was a kindergarten classroom in an urban public school that had recently centered play as an attempt from the local district to incorporate innovative teaching practices in schools that were deemed low- or under-performing. By that measure, this school qualified, and when the school board voted to accept the Jacaranda Model proposal, it was assigned to one of the lowest performing schools in the state. The study participants included 20 kindergarteners of whom roughly 85% identified as African American and 15% identified as “white” or “two or more races,” as well as their white lead teacher, who coauthored the model proposal, and her African American teaching assistant. Additionally, the principal and one parent, both white women, were
recruited to participate in interviews. The study took place during the second and final year of the implementation of the innovative model, and over the course of the year that I conducted the second phase of the research, the model came under intense and sometimes paralyzing scrutiny from state officials, district officials, and even administrators from within the school. Although I intended initially to focus mainly on the play and literacy practices enacted in the kindergarten classroom, a parallel story was unfolding from a wider perspective on the school community, and my focus shifted to explore what was happening not just at the classroom level but also at the school and district level and how the teacher, the students, parents, and the principal were affected.

Findings

I relied on data from interviews with Jenni and observational field notes from visits to her classroom to write about the ways she used the physical space of the classroom and her instructional time to offer opportunities for open-ended play for her students. Jenni supported her students’ development by being welcoming and tolerant of the behaviors typical of kindergarten-aged children, by intentionally offering them specific opportunities for play that supported areas of development, such as social, cognitive, motor, and language development, by providing opportunities for them to learn through concrete experiences, by helping them to feel successful in their school activities, and by using her observations of their play to recognize the progress they made through the year. Jenni challenged the notion that her students were engaged in “just play,” and she regularly commented on the challenges that children and teachers face in a play-based curriculum.
One way Jenni’s commitment to her beliefs about the importance of play in the lives of children was manifested was in the proposal for the Jacaranda School (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) she coauthored with three other like-minded colleagues. This model, inspired by the Waldorf approach to education, involved four key components: Artistic Integration, Play with Social Intent, Relationships as a Foundation, and Nutrition and Sustainability. The model also proposed appropriate assessment strategies and comprehensive and ongoing teacher training, and issues of equity were addressed throughout the document.

As a comparison of Jacaranda Model proposal with the data revealed, the implementation of the Jacaranda Model was not characterized by widespread fidelity and in the end was undermined and eventually upended by decisions made at the state, district, and school levels; this cancelation of the model deeply affected Jenni in professional and personal ways.

An interview with the Marion Elementary principal exposed the ways in which elusive definitions of play and conflicting conceptualizations of effective literacy instruction contributed to the fragmented opportunities the students at Marion experienced. Ms. Bond seemed to consider play to be either the physical or idle behavior in which children engage when they are not “doing the work” of school or teacher-directed and academic-based activities that happened in places at school other than in actual school desks. She frequently reinforced a paradigm in which play and learning are separate ventures even when she conceded they might sometimes be concurrent.

Carrie, a white, middle-class parent of one of Jenni’s students, applied through the magnet program to enroll her daughter in kindergarten at Marion because she was
attracted to curricula that would give Ella ample opportunity to play indoors and outdoors. Initially, she was happy with the choice she had made, but as a state audit loomed and the existence of the model came into jeopardy, she grew to believe that the curriculum became geared toward instructional standards and disconnected from students’ lives and that the teachers became less supportive of her daughter in the social and emotional issues she faced in interactions with peers and teachers. Carrie, like Jenni, also expressed extreme frustration with the short amount of time that the model was given to operate before it was discontinued.

Interviews with all three adult participants pointed to ways that the implementation and dismantlement of the Jacaranda Model were factors in the marginalization of disadvantaged students and families of Marion Elementary. This happened through overt exclusion from important decision-making processes, through micropractices of avoidance of race- and class-based issues by members in official capacities within the educational institution, and through the de facto participation in an actualized curricular model that did not value nor, eventually, permit their opportunities for open-ended play experiences.

Key Findings

The Play/Literacy nexus and the role of the teacher. The first research question was: What are the characteristics of a classroom in which play has been centered in the curriculum? How is literacy learning a part of this environment? The key finding expounded upon here show that although Jenni’s classroom exemplified one in which play had been centered in the curriculum, literacy learning was a part of the environment
not in the authentic ways that would be supported by a true play/literacy nexus but rather in a somewhat disconnected and rote way described below.

There were discrepancies in the ways the adult participants valued play as a part of the early childhood curriculum and in the ways that literacy instruction and literacy practices were taken up in the classroom, and these discrepancies compromised the play/literacy nexus that Wohlwend (2009) asserts. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Jenni had a keen understanding of the important place play holds in the lives of young children, and she worked to protect their time and space to play in her classroom. Her knowledge about the developmental underpinnings of play was evident in the interview data as well as my observations of her classroom. Jenni recognized the role of play in cognitive and social/emotional development (in addition to other areas of development) of her students. For instance, children in her class had opportunities to negotiate rules of cooperative games and control their impulses for the greater success of those games, such as when they took turns loading mulch onto the slide and plowing into the mulch by sliding into it (observational field notes, 9/23/16). This reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) and Cohen’s (2011) connected assertions that through play, children demonstrate growing abilities to resist urges for the sake of social roles and norms.

Children’s play eludes definitive consensus in the literature (Eberle, 2014; Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Elkonin, 2005) and in the conceptualizations of the participants in this study. Play also seems to elude quantification, and Ms. Bond’s insistence that it fit into a formulaic list of what should and should not be included in a play-based school curriculum, and in what form, and to what end, seems to defy the very nature of what children do. Ms. Bond’s
view of children’s play through the lens of the quantifiable data of education impeded her ability to understand the quality of play in the context of early learning. She also characterized literacy instruction as strictly quantifiable and skill-based.

Carrie, the parent participant, understood that “there are ways to do things that you quote-unquote need to do and still have lots of time for open-ended child-directed sort of free unstructured play” (interview #1, 2/24/17). Jenni, who held an Interdisciplinary Early Childhood certification to teach preschool, did not have the education or teaching experiences to inform an approach such as the one Carrie describes. Jenni resisted the pressure she felt from Ms. Bond and other district and school administrators to limit her students’ playtime because her belief in the value of play was strong, but the play/literacy nexus that Wohlwend (2009) identifies in her kindergarten study site, where play strengthens literacy practices and literacy practices strengthen play, was absent in Jenni’s classroom. Jenni worried about her abilities to teach the narrowly-defined literacy skills that she was pressured to teach, and the reality is that in her teacher training program, she had not been taught to incorporate literacy practices in play experiences. Perhaps because of this, she felt that open-ended play and early literacy instruction were at odds with one another. During an interim observation early in the school year, Jenni complained that she was “trying to find a way that [the Common Core State Standards and a play-based curriculum] are not separate but they are” (observational field notes, 9/23/16). Although Jenni was a willing teacher and a creative thinker, she considered these to be mutually exclusive of one another in the classroom because of her lack of experience. In fact, her understanding of literacy instruction seemed to be limited to a traditional, skill-based approach, rather than one rooted in a
whole language, balanced literacy, or transactional approach. In my observational field notes, I recorded instances where children responded to a script of phonological awareness tasks from which the teacher spoke, copied words from the chalkboard into alphabet-themed books they were making, and wrote down letters from words Jenni had sounded out, isolated phonemes from, and given children the letters for. These practices and others permit only the “convention” from Goodman & Goodman’s (1990) framework describing the tension between invention and convention that is at play in early language practices and literacy learning. Interestingly, the methods of literacy instruction in which Jenni engaged in the classroom countered a statement about what she felt her job as kindergarten teacher should be that she made to me earlier during the same interim observation I just cited: “I am here to love [the children] and facilitate, not direct, their learning” (observational field notes, 9/23/16). I think, based on Jenni’s stated and demonstrated philosophy of teaching, that she would have gladly engaged in the hard work of implementing a literacy curriculum in which children’s literacy practices are supported and extended by their play and in which their play opportunities were supported and extended by their literacy practices if she had had a deeper and more explicit understanding of how and why to do so.

Literacy learning is richest when it is meaningful (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey 1990/1932; Freire, 1970; Finn, 2009; Wohlwend, 2011; Larson, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). Jenni’s students regularly engaged in productive sociodramatic play at school, but without the tools and materials necessary for literacy practices at their ready disposal, their play did not have a sense of literacy purpose. Just as their skill-based literacy instruction relied on convention but allowed for little invention, their play was inventive
but was not exposed to and did not take up conventions that would have created a play/literacy nexus. When the understanding of play at school or the understanding of literacy instruction were compromised, both were compromised.

As was detailed in the Jacaranda Model (Forst, J., Moore, A., Nelson, J., & Terranova, A., 2014) and repeated by Jenni in our interviews, the role of the teacher is critical for creating an environment where children can both engage in meaningful play, which can centralize children’s cultural experiences in the classroom, as well as take up the social practices of literacy, which, as language practices, connect us to one another (Vygotsky, 1978; Paley, 2004; Vasquez, 2004; Shor, 1992; Wohlwend, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Finn, 1009).

**Funds of Knowledge, the Banking Model, and classroom control.** The second research question was: What effects does centering play have on the social practices in the classroom community and on marginalized learners? Findings in the previous chapter describe at length the effects play had on social practices in Jenni’s room. Here, the topic of marginalized learners and families in the school community is taken up.

Ms. Bond spoke repeatedly about the needs she perceived the majority of her students to have: “our kids really need, for example, exposure to print and to see books read aloud and to hold books and to understand concepts about print by seeing somebody reading and touching pictures and naming things and labeling things” (interview #1, 2/27/17). In this, Ms. Bond is referring to the majority of Marion’s student population who are African American children living under the poverty level in the neighborhoods around Marion and who attend Marion as apart of the district’s regular student assignment system. Ms. Bond’s perspective of Marion’s students is that they are blank
slates with little or no prior knowledge about literacy practices or skills. She reflects a belief in the banking model of education (Freire, 2000/1970), in which students are “receptacles to be filled by the teacher” (p. 72). In a longer passage, Ms. Bond asserts her idea that families whose children attend Marion as a part of the magnet program and who are mostly middle-class, white, and from other parts of town, do not want their children to be challenged, and that families whose children attend Marion because it is their “reside” school assigned to them by the district have said to her, “‘Our children don’t need nor want things slowed down, they need to have things provided that have been absent in the home’” (interview #1, 2/27/17). These excerpts contain powerful implications about the two different parent groups identified by Ms. Bond. First, this assumes that families who attend Marion through the magnet program have some level of understanding of and concurrence with the Jacaranda Model, and second, that they interpret the model as embodying no inspiration or demand for young learners to engage in or respond to. This belies the challenges of a play-based curriculum that Jenni describes and which are supported by the literature (Vygotsky, 1978; Dewey, 1990/1932; Wohlwend, 2009; Vasquez; 2004). Second, she projects an attitude of insufficiency or deficiency toward the homes and home lives of a wide swath of the families of Marion and assumes that those families themselves feel insufficient or at deficient.

The banking model of education (Freire 2000/1970) posits the teacher as the authority of what is to be learned and known, and the students as empty vessels ready to be filled. When this view of students as blank slates is taken up, assumptions about them, their families, their educational motives and aspirations, and their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) can go unacknowledged or ignored. This
deteriorates motivation and engagement in student learning (Freire; Moll et al., Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007) and contributes to homogeneity not just in what practices are valued at school but also in what is taught and learned.

In the banking model (Freire, 2000/1970), “the more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (p. 72). Reducing literacy instruction to the performative level of literacy skills (Finn, 2009) that Jenni was being pressured to do in her classroom discounts the knowledge, understanding, and experiences children bring with them to school and also ignores their cultural and personal identities and limits their ability to act as agentive learners (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Instead, students’ control over their learning outcomes is transferred to the authority of the teacher. This becomes magnified when perceived on a large scale, where the school is patronizingly posited as educating children for families who do not know how to do so themselves (Foucault, 1995/1975), the perception of which contributes to the maintenance of an entire system of control that is not easily disrupted.

Children’s play, which affords opportunities for children to try on perspectives, forge identities, and act with agency in imagined scenarios (Overstreet, 2018), disrupts the banking model in the school setting. When children are perceived as being disruptive and unmanageable, as the 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders and Marion Elementary were at the start of implementation of the Jacaranda Model, teachers and administrators can default to more controlling instructional methods, such as they did at Marion by reverting back to a traditional model for those grade levels. Just as play can take the form of sly subversion of authority (Bakhtin, 2011), so too can control be enacted to quell disruptions to the status quo. When administrators and district officials felt that the success of the
Jacaranda Model, or Marion Elementary, was in jeopardy, they exerted control by eliminating children’s sanctioned opportunities for sociodramatic play in the instructional model, and in so doing, curtailed the students’ abilities to enact their identities and participate in agentive learning in the school setting.

There was a discrepancy in the data between Carrie’s perception that Jenni exerted too much control over her students and my field notes and interview data. Carrie’s perception was that Jenni insisted that children sit up straight and be quiet on the rug and in a more personal sphere, that Carrie continue Ella’s disciplining at home for school infractions even though she had presumably already been disciplined at school. My observational field notes document children regularly rolling around on the rug, wandering the room, and talking out of turn during whole-group, teacher-led activities, and from the interview data emerged a theme in Jenni’s teaching philosophy of tolerance rather than management. Carrie expressed disbelief that Ella might be a behavioral outlier in the class, and so resisted what she considered excessive attempts at control on Jenni’s part. My hypothesis regarding the discrepancy is that this resistance influenced her perspective.

**Participation in the educational institution.** The third research question asked: How does play in school involve issues of equity and justice? Who gets to play? At Marion, it turned out that even the adoption of a play-based model involved the marginalization of students and families who were already attending the school through the district’s student assignment plan. Later, the model was revoked, first in part for just the oldest students at Marion, who then no longer “got to play” in a way sanctioned by the curriculum, and later, in full, so that the play-based approach was absent for all the
students at Marion, a student population that represented a largely poor, African American urban population.

An overarching finding of my research of the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary is the exclusion of the socioeconomically disadvantaged families who made up the majority of the Marion community from the decisions made at the state, district, and school level that affected the educational opportunities and experiences of their children. In broad strokes, the district and the state decided to adopt the Jacaranda Model, the district decided to place the model at Marion Elementary, school officials decided to pull the model from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades just after the start of the first year of implementation, and over time, all three of these entities undermined the efficacy of the model and, eventually, cancelled it altogether. These decisions were made in isolation from the families they most affected, and the families had little recourse but to go along with each one.

Ms. Bond expressed concern over whose voices were being heard in this process, but her assertion that the largely poor, local, African American families wanted the traditional, skill-based instruction that was “absent in the home” (interview #1, 2/27/17) seems to serve her shared agenda to dismantle the Jacaranda Model more than it serves the agenda, or needs, of the community to which she referred. Carrie expressed grave concerns over the ways in which the model, which she supported, was “imposed” (interview #2, 6/20/18) on the local school community. However, she failed to critically consider this perspective on her own until a full year had passed since her daughter had attended Marion as a student in the magnet program. With the advent of the Jacaranda Model, Carrie and her white, middle-class family took advantage of a new educational
option available to them in addition to the option of attending their assigned “reside”
school in the local school district. Meanwhile, the African American families living in
the neighborhoods around Marion were presented with a new but singular schooling
option in the form of a model they perhaps did not want but had little recourse to reject.

Jenni, the classroom teacher, did the hard work of building relationships with
families who were initially suspicious of her and her approach to education but who later,
least in part, came to value her presence at their school. There is little or no evidence
of state or local officials or school administrators reaching out in a similarly meaningful
way to families and students at Marion Elementary. Freire (2000/1970) asserts that rather
than living on the margins of society, oppressed people live within the oppressive
structures of society; students assigned to Marion attended school within the structure of
the Jacaranda Model whether or not they had chosen to do so. Applying for a transfer
away from one’s assigned school requires institutional capital which is, by design, not
readily available in communities like Marion’s (Bourdieu, 2002). Freire and others
(Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Moje, Lewis, &
Enciso, 2007; Shor, 1992) assert that through dialogic discourse everyday practices can
be disrupted and lead to societal change. Jenni, armed with her beliefs in children and in
play, engaged in dialog with families and successfully built relationships as a result.
Ample time for this work is critical, though, and without the benefit of time, lasting
relationships between various groups of stakeholders cannot be created and maintained.
When the Jacaranda Model was cancelled and Jenni was encouraged to leave Marion, the
relationships she built were ruptured, undermining the educational changes she had
attempted to make.
Limitations

One significant limitation of this study which has already been explained but which I will reiterate here is that the very population who was disenfranchised by the educational system throughout the whole process of adopting and later abandoning the Jacaranda Model was not represented by even one adult participant in this study. I was a white woman in a school serving mostly African American families who were being systemically excluded by the other white people involved in official capacities. I was unable to gain entry into this large subsection of the Marion school community despite my efforts. Thus, this community of African American families living under the poverty level in the urban neighborhoods immediately surrounding Marion whose voices were excluded from the decision-making processes concerning their school were also silent in and silenced by this study. I did not so much overcome this limitation as I did acknowledge it and postulate about it; it will be addressed again in a subsequent section on directions I identify for future research.

Another limitation of this study is that the research site did not turn out to be the site I anticipated it being. I was ultimately inspired to ask the questions I asked by Karen Wohlwend’s declaration that “play is the social justice issue of our time” (Indiana University School of Education Discourse Analysis conference, May, 2013). By the time I reached the point of piloting my dissertation research study, I had become very familiar with Wohlwend’s frequent research site, Abby’s classroom (Wohlwend, 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2011), where the play/literacy nexus is vibrant. I hoped to situate my study in a similar classroom and then foreground the contextual issues of equity to investigate
Further the compelling idea of play as a social justice issue. My site did not turn out to
house a rich play/literacy nexus, so that became a finding in and of itself.

Further, the play-based curriculum that attracted me to Marion Elementary to
begin with, as it turned out, was not implemented to fidelity school-wide, and restrictions
from school administrators and others prevented even Jenni, an ardent proponent of the
Jacaranda Model, from full fidelity in implementation. Eventually, the model was
formally discontinued by the school district, so the very setting I sought out in the
beginning was officially removed before the end of the school year during which I
conducted the bulk of the data collection. However, rather than this limiting the study I
originally conceptualized, it instead influenced the evolution of what the study became.
Thus, I do not think these were limitations that I overcame, per se, but rather significant
details that helped to determine the shape of my study and its findings.

Implications

This study has significant implications at the practical, theoretical, and policy
levels, and these are in regards to teachers, administrators, students, and families. First,
this study addresses the practical issues pre-service teachers face as they learn about the
importance of play in child development, how to advocate for its inclusion in their future
classrooms to their administrators and families of their students, and how to facilitate a
classroom culture wherein an enriched play/literacy nexus is accessible to all students. It
also addresses practical issues faced by in-service teachers as they advocate for,
implement, mediate, and manage sociodramatic play scenarios, literacy practices, and the
play/literacy nexus in the early childhood curriculum. Children and families will benefit
from being a part of classrooms where their social and literacy practices are centralized
and respected. Administrators will achieve cohesive and vertically aligned courses of study when the inventions and conventions of students’ social and literacy practices are valued across grade levels.

Second, this study contributes to the synthesis and understanding of the interconnectedness of theories related to play, early literacy, and critical literacy, and the ways societal and institutional inequities influence children’s educational experiences and opportunities as well as how these inequities can be disrupted, even at the classroom level.

Finally, at the policy level, this study will make a strong case for the revocation of skill-based instruction and assessment, which crowd out opportunities for sociodramatic play in school, limit the ways children can develop the identities of agentive learners, and exclude the many authentic literacies in which children and families engage outside of the classroom. At this level, administrators can hire and retain teachers who are driven by their teaching expertise and who tolerate children’s typical and appropriate behaviors and manage children by engaging them. Teachers will be valued for their professional training rather than for their ability to submit to scripted curricula and exert control.

**Recommendation**

In considering the far-reaching, comprehensive goals of the Jacaranda Model and the way that decisions at the state, district, and school administration levels undermined its success by, among other things, failing to keep commitments related to its implementation, I have a recommendation for how an alternative, innovative model might be implemented with higher fidelity and more lasting success.
As Jenni and her coauthors counseled the district officials with whom they worked on implementation, the roll-out for an educational model such as the Jacaranda Model should be done slowly. Rather than beginning at the curricular level inside the school as was attempted at Marion, however, I recommend starting at a figurative but visible intersection between the school and the community. For instance, Jenni and her coauthors had been hopeful that a nature playground would be constructed on Marion’s grounds to support the Waldorf approach the model espoused. I argue that had they started with a playground, one such as what they hoped for, made out of natural materials with plantings and water features to create a natural aesthetic, families and students would not have felt threatened by the sudden and extreme changes to their school practices and expectations, and other teachers would not have felt unprepared because of a lack of training. Instead, children and their families, and students and their teachers, should have had a warming up period of up to perhaps two years, of gradual changes that inherently introduce some of the qualities of a new model in non-threatening contexts rather than drastically changing instructional strategies and learning expectations while retaining the use higher stakes testing. These disparate aspects of a new schooling experience could gradually be integrated with one another so as to eventually create a cohesive curriculum. In that time frame, relationships would have had time be cultivated and, even more importantly, these relationships would foster discussions about the curriculum so that an informed consensus could be reached amongst stakeholders. Teachers, administrators, and families would have a mutual understanding of cooperatively-created objectives, expectations, and purposes of the curriculum and would support it more effectively through its implementation. Facilitating the initial steps of
implementation in this way would reflect the dialogic study that characterizes critical literacy practices, and community members, even those who have been traditionally disenfranchised from decision-making processes, would have opportunities to interrogate proposed changes or practices and voice support or opposition in meaningful, respected, and productive ways.

**Future Research**

One direction for future research is an ethnographic study similar to this one in scope and topic but with the inclusion of voices from outside dominant society. In the case of Marion, it would be the voices of the African American families who had attended Marion before, during, and/or after the adoption of the Jacaranda Model. These families represented the vast majority of the student population but, significantly, were absent in this study. Since this study sought to explore issues of equity and play in the curriculum, it is critical that the same questions get asked of members of the community who are missing here.

Another direction for future research would be to employ purposeful sampling to choose a research site where the play/literacy nexus was established and to explore the characteristics of the classroom and social practices as well as the issues of equity related to who was getting to play.

A final direction for future research would be to explore further the emotional and professional phenomenon experienced in this study by Jenni, who dedicated herself to the successful implementation of the Jacaranda Model, only to have its success undermined and derailed by the officials who were supposed to be providing support. In what ways will she continue to manifest her strong beliefs in play for young children? Based on her
experiences with the Jacaranda Model and Marion Elementary, what would she try again and what would she do differently? How will those experiences stay with her as her teaching career continues to evolve?

**Final Statement**

I have been personally interested in issues of social equity and social justice for most of my life, and I have woven this interest into my scholarly and professional pursuits. Children’s sociodramatic play became an interest as I learned about its theoretical underpinnings as well as its practical evidence in my graduate program. During my doctoral studies, these interests became triangulated with my newer understandings of literacy practices and systemic, institutional inequity.

When I first began this study of the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary, I found Jenni’s enthusiasm for children’s play to be invigorating and infectious. Because of this, and because of a naïve assumption on my part that my study should be tidy and anticipate any bumps, I almost willfully maintained a narrow focus on her classroom for the first few months of the study. I enjoyed observing her students but between the strict limits that had been placed upon me by the Data Management Office of the local school district in terms of the type of data I could collect (no recording devices around the children and no individually identifying features of them in my dissemination) as well as the increasing awareness of what I came to consider “the bigger story,” I started to widen my lens and take in what was happening to the families of Marion and the Jacaranda Model while I had been watching the children play in the kitchen area and dollhouse of Jenni’s classroom. When I did, aspects of education and schooling that had intrigued me to begin with were revealed: evidence of the importance of the play/literacy nexus, play
as an entry point to undertaking critical literacy, qualitative, ethnographic research opportunities, and yes, a deep understanding of play in early childhood as well as personal prejudices and institutional inequities on small and grand scales.

To my surprise and delight, the intersection of these interests led me to the fascinating, disheartening, and, most of all, compelling story of the Jacaranda Model at Marion Elementary School, a story I initially did not want to tell, at the center of which, in this study, is Jenni, a teacher who continues to find interesting niches in which to work in the local public school system, and who continues to include me in sharing her thoughts, ideas, and aspirations, which continue to captivate my researcher’s eye.
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APPENDIX

Interview Protocols

Questions for interviews with adult participants will fall into five broad categories:

1. Perceptions about the importance of play in early childhood.
2. Tensions between a play-based kindergarten and a more traditional skills-based schooling experience.
3. Curricular issues related to play in early childhood school settings, including cognitive and academic development.
4. Behavioral issues related to play in early childhood school settings, including social and emotional development.
5. Demographic information [age, race(s), years of experience in education (for teachers and administrators), age(s) of children (for parents)].

It is important to note that while these questions will guide my interviews, the interviews themselves will be characteristic of qualitative research interviews and may likely lead in unexpected yet interesting and relevant directions.

Protocol for Initial Interview with Lead Teacher:

1. What experiences led you to value the inclusion of play in early childhood education?
2. What challenges have you faced regarding your centering of play in the curriculum versus a more traditional approach? From where have those challenges seem to have come?
3. How do you see play in the curriculum supporting or not supporting your students’ cognitive and academic development? How do you address situations when students seem to have a learning difference—does play affect those decisions?
4. How do you see play supporting or not supporting your students’ social and emotional development? How do you address what are commonly seen as behavioral issues—social problems between students or between students and teachers?
5. How long have you been a teacher at this school? How long have you been a teacher? What is your age? With what race(s) do you identify?

Protocol for Subsequent Reflection Interviews with Lead Teacher (to be conducted after each observation event):

[These interviews, conducted shortly after each classroom observation event, will be focused on up to two interactions I document during the observation. I may, for example, ask her about why she made a particular choice in setting up a play event, such as why she decided to provide the students with a felt board in the class library area. Alternatively, perhaps a particular interaction between a group of students and the teacher may be of interest, and I question her instead about choices she makes in the moment with her students. Generally speaking, the purpose of these reflection interviews will be to gain a deeper understanding of why this teacher makes particular decisions regarding her students’ engagement in play opportunities, either in advance or in the moment.]

Protocol for School Principal Interview:

1. What experiences led you to value the inclusion of play in the early childhood curriculum?
2. What challenges have you faced regarding the centering of play in kindergarten at your school? From district officials? From parents? From faculty?
3. In what ways do you think this play-based approach to early childhood education is supporting your school’s students academically?
4. In what ways do you think this play-based approach is supporting your school’s students socially and emotionally?
5. How long have you been a principal at this school? How long have you been a principal? Were you a teacher before that and if so, for how long? What is your age? With what race(s) do you identify?

Protocol for Parent Interview:

1. What is your perspective on play being so centrally included in the early childhood curriculum in this school?
2. How do you feel about your child being in a school that values play versus if they were in a school that embraced a more traditional approach?
3. Tell me about what you’ve noticed regarding your child’s academic progress at school this year.
4. Tell me about what you’ve noticed regarding your child’s social interactions at school this year.
5. How many children do you have and what are their ages? What is your age? With what race(s) do you identify? With what race(s) does your child identify?

Letter Sent Home to Families

October 2016
Dear Families of [Ms. Jenni’s] class,

My name is Janey Andris and I am a doctoral student at the University of Louisville in the College of Education and Human Development. Under the supervision of Dr. Lori Norton-Meier, I will be conducting a research study this year involving your child’s classroom wherein I will be observing regular classroom activities. My broad research interest is play in the early childhood classroom, so I was attracted to [Marion] Elementary School because of the central role open-ended play holds here. I am so excited to observe how the students at Marion engage with one another, their teachers, and the curriculum through their play opportunities!

As part of the study, I will be interviewing the teachers and the principal. I would deeply appreciate the opportunity to include interviews with parents, too! I also work full-time as a teacher, and am a parent of two toddlers, so I understand how busy and demanding households with young children can be. I will look forward to perhaps seeing you around school and maybe we’ll have an opportunity to talk more about your parental perspective on play in early learning.

There are no known risks for your child’s participation in this research study. The information collected may not benefit them directly but will contribute to the existing body of research regarding the value of play in the early childhood curriculum as well as the social implications its inclusion at schools can have. Data (collected from classroom observations and interviews with adults) will be stored in a password-protected computer file. Individuals from the College of Education and Human Development at the University, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPO), and other regulatory agencies may inspect these records. In all other respects, however, the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your child’s identity will not be disclosed.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact: Dr. Lori Norton-Meier at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or me, at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Otherwise, if you have any questions about the rights of a research subject, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office at (502) 852-5188. You can discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject, in private, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also call this number if you have other questions about the research, and you cannot reach the research staff, or want to talk to someone else. The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this research study.

If you have concerns about the research or research staff and you do not wish to give your name, you may call 1-877-852-1167. This is a 24 hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University.

Participation in this study (which for the purposes of the children will be my observations of regular classroom activities – children will not be interviewed, surveyed, etc.) is voluntary. If for any reason you do not wish for your child to be included please sign and return this form to [Ms. Jenni].
Thank you so much!

Best,
Lori Norton-Meier, PhD
Janey Andris

I do not want my child to be a participant in this study.
Child’s name (please print) __________________________________________
Parent/guardian signature __________________________________________
Date _______________________________
CURRICULUM VITAE

Jane E. Andris
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EDUCATION
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Ph.D., Education, December, 2018
Dissertation: “Children’s Play, Early Literacy, and Educational (In)Equities”
Dissertation Committee: Dr. Lori Norton-Meier, chair; Dr. Ann Larson, Dr.
Bronwyn Williams; and Dr. Jill Jacobi-Vessels.

Thesis: “‘Down from the mother’s lap:’ Traditional American Folk Song in the
Experiences of Children”
Thesis Advisor: Professor Betsy Blachly

Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, B.A., English Literature, minor in Religious Studies, 2001

ACADEMIC/RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
University of Louisville
• Adjunct Professor, Fall 2014 and Summer 2015, “Literacy Learning and Cultural
Differences”
• Student Research Assistant, Summer 2013- Summer 2014, “Composing Stories
Project”
• Independent Research Assistant, 2003-04, “Comprehensive School Reform,
Educational Dynamics, and Achievement in Kentucky Middle Schools.” US
Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement.
• Independent Research Assistant, 2003-04, “A Research Study of the Kentucky
Teacher Internship Program Pilot Project.” Kentucky Education and Professional
Standards Board.

Bank Street College of Education
• Teaching Assistant, Spring 2006 and Fall 2006, “Music and Movement”

Kentucky Youth Advocates
• Assistant to the Senior Policy Analyst and KidsCount Coordinator (Annie E. Casey Foundation grant), 2002-2003

Kenyon College
• Class member, North-by-South Seminar, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1999-2000

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Kentucky Country Day School, Louisville, Kentucky
• Junior Kindergarten Lead Teacher 2007-present

St. Francis School
• Junior Kindergarten Lead Teacher 2004-05

PRESENTATIONS


PUBLICATIONS


AWARDS AND HONORS
• Recipient, University of Louisville, School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, Graduate Dean’s Citation Award, 2018
• Recipient, University of Louisville, College of Education and Human Development, Diane Kyle Award for Outstanding Community Engagement, 2018
• Recipient, Kentucky Country Day School Fortnight Professional Development Award, 2014
• Recipient, Humana Foundation Scholarship, 1998-2001
• Kentucky Governor’s Scholar, 1996

**LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**
University of Louisville
• Member, Literacy Team, Curriculum Design and Program Planning, 2015

Kentucky Country Day School
• Lower School Report Card Committee, 2016-17
• Lower School Liaison, Faculty Diversity Committee, 2007 (inception)-2013
• Lower School Representative, Faculty Council, Fall 2009-Spring 2011
• Member, Curriculum Committee, 2009-2010

**MANUSCRIPTS IN PREPARATION FOR SUBMISSION FOR PUBLICATION**
Andris, J. A teacher’s journey: Professional identity and educational leadership roles.

Andris, J. Tolerance versus management in an early childhood setting.

Andris, J. Accepting children’s play in the school setting.

**CERTIFICATIONS**
Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board, 2009
• Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education Teaching Certification
• Elementary School Education Teaching Certification

Northeast Foundation for Children
• *Responsive Classroom*, Institute I, 2008
• *Responsive Classroom*, Institute II, 2009

New York State Education Department
• Training in School Violence Prevention and Intervention, 2006
• Training in Identification and Reporting of Child Abuse and Maltreatment, 2006

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION**
• American Educational Research Association
• National Council of Teachers of English
• National Association for the Education of Young Children