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Early childhood educators often describe classroom quality in terms that indicate we can “recognize it when we see it”, but we have struggled to provide measures that capture some of the more subjective components of quality. A multi-level qualitative study was designed as an attempt to better understand and operationalize specific teacher practices occurring in high quality preschool classrooms. Focus group discussions with experienced classroom assessors were conducted to better understand specific attributes present in classrooms where children are engaged in the learning process and participate in classroom activities. Identified themes and constructs from the focus groups were supported by current literature and guided development of a preliminary tool used in classroom observations. Observations were used to support use of some items on the tool, provide needed revisions to language, and to identify additional important contributors to children’s engagement. Findings from the classroom observations indicated a low occurrence of many items on the tool, as well as the continued need to provide measurement strategies and tools that capture important contextual factors and unique characteristics existing in classrooms.

TEACHER PRACTICES IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS:
PROMOTING ENGAGED LEARNERS

by

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To my mom, Elgie Underwood, for making sure I had the opportunity for an education and to my dad, Arthur Underwood, for sharing his love of “the book” with me. I am eternally grateful to you both.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The importance of providing quality early childhood experiences is widely recognized. The significance of our early experiences and the relationships we build has long been viewed as important to our development as human beings. More and more these early experiences for individuals now include a classroom setting. The importance of providing classrooms that allow and encourage children to be “enthusiastic and engaged” learners has been recognized (Hyson, 2008), as well as creating “opportunities for learning” (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). It is generally agreed that these concepts are included in high quality classrooms. The significance of “how” we provide educational experiences is recognized along with “what” we teach children.

In conversation, early childhood educators often describe quality in terms that indicate we can “recognize it when we see it”, but we have struggled to provide measures that capture many of the specific components of quality. Research has helped us to understand more about the influences on quality and predictors of quality, but there is much that we do not yet understand. In many cases we have focused on measuring the more easily quantifiable items related to quality while avoiding the more difficult and subjective areas. In spite of this, we continue to recognize the importance of relationships, enthusiasm in children, and caring, nurturing adults (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004; Hyson, 2008).

This study is an attempt to better understand less easily measured components that we know are important to quality, but are easily influenced by individual interpretation and varying perspectives. Answers to the question “What strategies and practices are used by teachers in preschool classrooms where children are engaged and enjoying learning?” guided the process of this study. Information from multiple sources was incorporated into the methodology and the findings. The perspectives of individuals with extensive experience observing classrooms, the current literature from the early childhood field, and observations of varying classroom settings were all employed to gain greater clarity on how to describe and identify teacher practices associated with preschool classrooms where children were engaged in learning.

Due to the very subjective nature of the constructs of interest, a qualitative methodology seemed most applicable. Reflective of the qualitative methods employed, this study has been influenced along the way by the knowledge and understandings gained throughout the process. As knowledge related to a construct was gained, this understanding was then used to influence the direction of the study and the methodology.

As a beginning point of the process, a review of existing instruments measuring teacher practices potentially related to children’s engagement was completed. Many scales designed to measure “global” quality, teacher-child interactions, or social-emotional domains contain items identifying important practices for teachers, but no one scale focusing on this area was found. From this review of existing measures and current practitioner directed literature a list of potential practices for teachers to use in facilitating engagement of children was developed for use as a preliminary tool. Information from

this part of the process and the preliminary tool guided the research focus for the later components of the project. Also fitting with the qualitative methodology framework, multiple sources of information were employed throughout the study. In addition to the preliminary tool development work, reviews of current literature, focus group discussions, and classroom observations all contributed information to the study. Knowledge gained from all of these various sources worked together to offer insights and direction for further study throughout the process. Information from the current literature influenced the questions asked during focus groups and the creation of the preliminary tool. The focus group discussions influenced the on-going revisions for the preliminary tool, as well as the literature reviewed. The preliminary tool guided the classroom observations and the observations then lead to revisions of the tool. This non-linear, sometimes circuitous, process resulted in insights from multiple sources, all of which at times influenced each other.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theories of Learning

As part of this journey toward a deeper understanding, a review of several prominent theories of learning was undertaken. This review is done with a developmentalist perspective that recognizes the various theories offer unique contributions to our understanding at different points in history and that in many ways we have built upon earlier theoretical understandings to arrive at our current prevalent theories and thoughts. A similar perspective is also utilized throughout this study as attempts are made to understand the “next steps” needed to better describe and understand the components that are most crucial to engaging children in the process of learning.

This look at the important contributors over the years suggests that there is an evolution of our understanding of the concept of how humans learn. In the beginning, many suggested a very passive process was at work. Human beings learned through their experiences, but were not instrumental in the process, merely recipients of the outcome of the process. John Locke held the idea that we come into existence as a “blank slate” merely awaiting the influence of our world to mold our ideas, thoughts and ways of behaving. John Watson and B.F. Skinner recanted the importance of the reinforcement and rewards we receive as part of our learning. Our experiences, both positive and

negative, heavily dictate our future responses. This system of reinforcement and reward/punishment determines our abilities and is central to learning new skills and behaviors (Skinner, 1963). Through these naturally occurring or planned consequences, we learn and develop over time. The teacher's role in this framework is to structure the needed tasks and provide the reinforcements for continued learning.

Continuing this evolution of thought, Bandura and others expanded these early ideas to include the ability to observe and learn from the consequences or outcomes associated with the behaviors of other people. While still mostly a passive process, this slightly altered view suggested that we can learn by observing others. This social aspect of learning recognizes the role that behaviors modeled by those around us holds for our learning, whether or not we actually engage in the same behaviors. (Hergenhahn & Olson, 1997, Gordon & Brown, 1985).

Still other theorists have viewed learning and development as a function of time. By existing and growing, we will systematically go through the normal stages of learning associated with human development (Dalton, 2005, Kohlberg, 1968). Those who see learning as resulting from our maturation and physical development may still recognize that our experiences influence our learning as earlier theorists have expounded. However this view of learning affords our progression through consecutive, predictable stages as the key mechanism for our learning.

Piaget and other constructivists concur that typical stages of development exist, particularly relating to cognitive development. However, those identifying with this perspective stress that it is through interaction with our environment, that we learn how to

organize and gain information and knowledge. While there is a predictable sequence of stages with specific abilities acquired, this process happens through the interaction of individuals with their environment. For these theorists, learning is an individualized process of assimilating or incorporating ideas into our existing understanding or changing the structure of our understanding to accommodate new ideas that do not fit (Piaget, 1970; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005, Gordon & Browne, 1985). This idea that there may be individual differences in the stages of development does not discount, but rather expands this progression. The teacher's role, for those holding a constructivist view, then becomes encouraging children to explore and providing support for children to create their own individualized learning (Mooney, 2000).

Still others such as Vygotsky have focused on the impact our surrounding environments can have on our learning. Vygotsky, in particular includes the importance of our social interactions and their contributions to our learning and development. The working together of social and cognitive development and the ability of humans to use these two areas to build individualized learning further expanded the concept that we create our own learning. Vygotsky's contributions to our understanding of how we learn allow us to include the idea that we are capable of and compelled to impact our own destiny. Through our individualized interactions with our environment, we determine our unique path of development. The teacher's role for those holding this view of learning becomes that of assisting children and creating supports for reaching new concepts. This support includes allowing children to talk and work with peers and encouraging them to

complete tasks that are within their capabilities. (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005, Mooney, 2000).

Bronfenbrenner included the impact that individuals and institutions within our everyday lives hold for our development. These included social relationships, as suggested by Vygotsky, as well as institutions we interact with on a regular basis. This expanding circle of influence includes our families, schools, and social institutions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2005).

While all of these theories assume the importance of the human brain in our learning, recently deeper understandings of how this organ works and the complexities associated with its development have added to our evolution of knowledge regarding human learning and cognition. It is important to take note of these new understandings as we attempt to determine the best ways to engage children in learning and to offer suggestions for classroom practices that will promote learning.

Brain Development Research

In recent years, research has provided insights to the physiological processes associated with our brain's development. Through a process of expanding connections happening at the molecular level, our brains adjust to our individual environments. At first we are busy creating many more connections than are needed and later reducing or pruning back to just those necessary for our unique needs. This process is continually interactive, with our environment and our genetics constantly at work simultaneously. (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Our physical growth and development, the stimulation in the environment around us, and the timing of certain experiences will determine much about our abilities. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University, "...the quality of a child's early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strengths or weaknesses of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions." (National Scientific Council, 2007)

This field of research leads us to understand that human brains contain a genetic framework that exists before birth. This genetic framework is available, but dependent upon the influences of a child's environment to determine the final outcome. A sequential order exists that calls on certain processes to develop at specific points in our development (e.g., we see and hear before we develop language abilities). During critical or "sensitive periods" of development the environmental influences around us can create varying outcomes in brain function. The presence of toxic materials, extreme trauma, or the absence of critical nutritional components in our environments can cause changes in our brain development. In addition, our experiences and interactions with our environment contribute to our developing brain matter and neurons. When we interact with some portion of our environment, this experience provides opportunities for expansion or limiting of our neural development. Similar events may have varied outcomes for brain development, depending on our particular sensitive period and individual development and environment (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is comforting to

note that even though our sensitive periods provide the optimum timing for the development of skills and abilities, our human brain retains the ability to continue creating connections and developing beyond these critical times. However, as any adult who has ever tried to learn a new language can attest, while possible, it is not easy to learn skills and abilities beyond these sensitive periods.

While this field of research offers much to help understand the various influences on our learning, it should be noted that it has assisted most in understanding the detrimental influences of deprivation and harmful influences in young children's environments. Much of the research that has allowed us to better understand the brain's development has come from studies of deprivation in humans and animals. The impact of physical trauma or deprived environments in the lives of humans and animals has provided a great deal of our understanding in this field. We can better identify how to protect and avoid environmental damage to young children's development than to detail the exact influences that should be present for optimal growth. While we better understand the harmful impact of deprivation, there is no indication that excessive stimulation provides any improvement in typically developing children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Chaos Theory

An interesting new approach to thinking about teaching and learning comes from Davis, Smith and Leflore (2008) as they attempt to combine ideas from chaos theory, a critical thinking framework and recent brain research. Their theory is described as one "grounded" in constructivist theory and viewed through a lens of chaos theory. Basic

components of this approach to understanding how we learn include embracing the ideas that learning is non-linear, that stability and instability must exist at the same time, and that emotions are essential for learning.

Chaos theory was proposed by Gleick (1987) in reporting a discovery made by Edward Lorenz indicating mathematical predictions of weather patterns could vary widely with even the most minute differences in their beginning points. Widely varying outcomes predicted through iterative equations could result when beginning values varied less than .000001. This chaos theory concept described as “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” has been viewed in meteorological terms as the impact of a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world later resulting in a hurricane or tornado in another part of the world. The impact of this minute change in one far away area over time could produce (or help avoid) an outcome in another part of the world.

Even small differences in beginning conditions for children can also result in widely varying outcomes, especially when combined with an iterative process over time. Davis, et.al (2008) use this concept in describing the outcomes that can result when a child is removed from a reading group for challenging behaviors or hyperactivity. In this description, removing the child from the group results in a loss of knowledge; which in turn may produce further challenging or inappropriate behaviors; which again results in removal from the group. This reiterative process may easily result in even wider gaps between this child and the rest of the group, not only in reading skills but also in other areas. A different outcome might be achieved if the initial condition had been dealt with

in a manner that allowed the child to still gain knowledge and skills while addressing the challenging behaviors.

In chaos theory, the concept of “attractors” is used to describe the mapping or measuring of a process in a dynamic system. Paulson (2005) described this as the behavior a system “settles down to” or is attracted toward. He uses the analogy of a valley with surrounding hills where rocks roll toward the valley, regardless of where they are on the hills. There are three levels of attractors described by Davis, et al. (2008) in their theory. The most basic level and simplest is called the fixed point attractor. At this level, there may be many considerations, discussions, ideas, but everything eventually settles around one basic point. They use a discussion of a destination for a field trip where everyone arrives at an agreement as an example.

A second level, referred to as “limit cycle”, is present when there are two points that serve as attractors. In this example, there may be two different and opposing ideas that are discussed and agreement cannot be reached. This level will have two equally valid points, but there is no agreement by the system that one is more valid or important. At this level, as the term implies, there are still a fairly limited number of attractors and they are fairly defined.

It is in the third level of attractors, or the “strange attractor”, that Davis et al. propose critical thinking skills emerge. In this level, there is a re-organization of ideas and thoughts into new concepts with greater complexity. The iteration occurring produces many and varied ideas which provide input for the next idea and eventually

result in more complex solutions, ideas, or thoughts. The authors compare it to Piaget's concept of disequilibrium and view it as critical to the process of learning.

Davis, et al., also compare this dynamic process to the information now available regarding how the human brain operates. The idea that the brain can at the same time contain both stability and instability is similar to the structure underlying chaos theory. While a system may be "globally stable" such as a healthy brain, it is through the "chaotic" fringes or the brain's synapses where growth and learning occur. As with the brain's development of synapses, there is a process of creating new connections and pruning those deemed to be irrelevant or unnecessary. This flexible fringe area of a system, whether it be an organic system, a classroom, or a society is where new information is organized and greater complexity can be incorporated into the system.

In a traditional sense, a theory is used for prediction of future behavior. However, chaos theory seems better suited as a means for understanding and interpreting, rather than predicting (Davis, Smith, & Leflore, 2008; Buell & Cassidy, 2001; Paulson, 2005). This lens allows us to view learning as non-linear, complex, dynamic and dependent upon many subtleties. Teaching then becomes the process of recognizing the opportunities for learning, of creating the conditions for ambiguity and conflict in thought and ideas, and of allowing a degree of chaos to be present in educational settings.

Conclusions Drawn

For those who hold a developmentalist perspective, there is much to be gained from understanding progressions and stages. Life is about growth and development, what has happened and what to expect will happen. In this view, our understanding of learning

has progressed from a fairly simple and passive reinforcement system to a complex, individualized and non-linear system where humans have a role in creating learning. Some even suggest the importance of a degree of instability and chaos. This evolution of thought leads us to the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the educational settings we provide for young children. In these settings, the opportunities offered, the strategies utilized by teachers, the materials provided and the interactions encountered all become important in the process of learning. Equally important is how we choose to measure the educational settings offered for young children.

Measuring Quality Learning Environments

Structural and Process Quality

Existing research on the components of quality educational environments for young children is often conflicting and sometimes confusing. Literature suggests that the field has tried to understand the "whole" picture of quality and often understands little about the varying "parts" that create the whole. Indeed, much of our understanding of quality comes from use of global quality measures. In order to better understand the parts, there is a need for instruments and tools to provide mechanisms for study.

Dickinson (2006) presents the idea of a toolkit approach with a range of high quality instruments that include specific domain measures for varying curriculum content areas. It is possible to conceive of this "toolkit" approach extending beyond curriculum into other areas of learning environments as well. One important focus of the use of these tools is in not only providing information about what skills and concepts are taught, but also more detail about how this information is taught. Aligned with these tools for

measuring specific teaching processes would be tools designed to measure related specific outcomes for children. This change in focus calls for a willingness to give up the some of the benefits for use of "tried and true" measures, but offers the benefit for gaining a deeper understanding of the components of quality.

The early childhood field has for some time recognized two distinct areas that are important to understandings of quality classrooms. These are referred to as structural and process quality (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr & Abbott-Shim, 2000, Howes, Phillips & Whitebook, 1992, Dunn, 1993). The term "structural" has sometimes been used synonymously with "regulatable" due to the frequent monitoring of the included items by government agencies responsible for licensing childcare programs (Howes, et al., 1992). However, in some studies, structural items have included areas that are not typically regulated, such as teacher wages and parent fees (Scarr, Eisenberg & Deater-Decker, 1994, Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes & Cryer, 1997, Phillips, et al., 2000, Goelman, et al., 2006). The importance of structural items such as teacher education, teacher-child ratios, group size, etc. would be hard to deny. While equally noted in importance, the role of more process items, such as the quality of interactions between adults and children or the importance of peer interactions is more difficult to measure due to the greater subjectivity inherent in this area.

Research has provided links between structural variables, process quality measures and child outcomes. Howes, et al., (1992) found adult-child ratios to be related to appropriate caregiving. Additionally, positive relationships between appropriate caregiving and secure attachment behavior, as well as social orientation were found.

Security and social orientation for children were positively related to competence with their peers.

Dunn (1993) found proximal (process) and distal (structural) quality to be equally predictive of children's social development and less predictive of cognitive development. In her study, the composite score from one of the most frequently used global quality assessment tools, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, (ECERS; Harms & Clifford, 1980) was categorized as a distal quality component. The ECERS rating, along with adult-child ratio, group size, and caregiver characteristics were seen as providing the potential for positive experiences for children, while proximal quality was identified as those events directly experienced by children. The measure used for proximal quality in this study was developmentally appropriate practice outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), (Bredekamp, 1986). Dunn's decision was based on an expressed attempt to use a "theory of practice", as opposed to a theory of development as a basis and framework for studying quality.

Distinctions between these two areas of structure and process are described by Hamre and Pianta (2007) as "opportunities to teach" and "opportunities to learn". The opportunities to teach are the supports necessary for general quality, and may include the curriculum chosen, the materials available, and the climate established for teachers in school settings. However, it is the opportunities to learn, or the actual interactions and facilitation of learning by teachers that constitutes the ultimate growth of children within these settings. Through understanding of this process of facilitation and relationship building (or proximal process) that occurs between teachers and children in their

classrooms, the opportunity for impacting growth exists. One framework for capturing proximal or learning opportunities is outlined in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, Hamre, 2006) and includes three main areas. These areas are emotional climate (teacher sensitivity, regard for students and emotional tone), classroom organization (behavior management, use of time for learning, and engagement of children) and instructional support (concept development, quality of feedback and modeling of language). A focus on the professional development of individual teachers and their growth over time through use of this or similar measures is seen as a way to impact the most important factors in children's learning and development. It is through these proximal processes, or those interactions that most closely unite the adults and children in classroom settings, that teachers can create excitement about learning and better engage children in the process of learning. It is important to assist teachers through their own professional growth to better understand the importance of these processes and how to build relationships with children, as well as how they can influence the learning environment.

Assessment vs Measurement

When trying to determine methods to better understand the highest level of quality for young children, the issue of measurement as compared to assessment becomes critical. Measurement can be described as collected information about one moment or point in time. There are many valid reasons for relying on instruments and techniques that measure a picture of what is happening at a given point in time. This strategy allows information on a large number of classrooms to be collected fairly quickly. This is

particularly important when trying to make the best use of limited available dollars.

Measurement also allows researchers the opportunity to obtain information on several different aspects of the classroom environment. Because the end result is in mind before the collection of information, (i.e., a standard is established and each classroom is then measured against that standard) it allows comparisons between programs to be made and analyzed. This process of establishing a standard and then training individuals to rate according to the standard can also allow greater objectivity and avoid the influence of bias held by researchers.

By comparison, assessment, when viewed as an on-going process, is equally beneficial, but with differing results possible. Assessment when viewed as a dynamic, on-going process rather than a snapshot measure, allows for deeper understanding of constructs. It is also a more individualized and subjective process. This individualization, however, allows a greater degree of contextual information to inform researchers' understanding (i.e., the percentage of time spent on a particular skill, content area, or concept may be related to identified needs of a particular group of children). Since assessment using this framework, often involves the process of setting individual goals and then measuring progress against those goals, it is easier to capture change that happens over time. This change is often very individualized, but may capture children's progress, teacher growth, change for small groups of individuals, etc. Use of “assessment” rather than “measurement” techniques also makes information gained questionable for generalizing to larger populations.

Both measurement and assessment methods seem to be important in trying to gain clarity about the necessary ways to impact the quality of early childhood classrooms. Over-reliance on either one leaves us with only part of the picture. To date, we have much more information regarding overall quality of childcare centers that has been derived from use of measurement strategies rather than assessment methods. These measurements of points in time providing larger amounts of information, especially in an emerging field of study, are crucial to informing the understanding of quality. However, "snapshots" taken at different points in time, in varying programs, and without a contextual understanding have also provided insights into only small portions of the picture of what impacts quality.

What emerges from scrutiny of current and recent attempts to measure quality is that we are consistently capturing a moment in time measurement of quality, rather than assessing growth over time. This dynamic construct of quality that we advocate to be individualized and developmental for children may not be able to be captured solely by use of static measures. Perhaps we should be measuring the process of attaining quality, rather than treating it as an end result (Phillips, 1996). Our attempts to date have consistently revealed variables that are statistically significant, but often minimal contributors to the overall picture. There is much that we still do not understand.

Hamre and Pianta (2007) point out "few reliable methods exist (for) determining which classroom experiences promote academic success and positive social development" (p.49). We have found *generally* what matters to children, however, we have much farther to go in knowing *specifically* which attributes makes a difference in

improving quality in classrooms. We have also been slow in developing methods of assessment that focus on these more process oriented constructs. Dickinson (2006) notes that the tools relied on to measure quality do not typically measure literacy, math skills or other domains of knowledge. The measuring of skills and information taught, as well as greater detail of the methods used would allow greater understanding of the influences on child outcomes. When trying to determine methods to understand how to provide the highest level of quality for young children, the issue of measurement as compared to assessment becomes critical.

Perhaps our efforts need to begin with the “end”, or the children’s responses to our attempts to educate them. If our definitions of measurement continue to focus on features of the environment created, or the actions and practices of teachers in these environments without providing a means for input from the children, then we may be missing an important component of truly measuring quality. While this is truly a difficult and often subjective component to include, it seems that true “quality” must include the perspective of the individual children involved in our classrooms. Including at some level a measurement of the process for children seems an often missing component of our existing quality measurements.

Engagement/Approaches to Learning

Definitions

In analyzing how we measure quality, it is critical to take a close look at what aspects of learning environments that “matter” in terms of children’s engagement in the

learning process. Therefore the words we use, and the meanings we attribute to these words, are important. In our effort to operationalize features of the learning environment that promote children's engagement, we must first examine the definitions used to describe children's engagement or approaches toward learning. Hyson (2008) discusses the historical development of the terminology, "Approaches toward (to) Learning" as arising from attempts to include the importance of "how" children learn, as well as "what" they learn. She describes the distinction as needed by those trying to identify strategies and policy recommendations for getting children "ready to learn". The emphasis by the National Education Goals Panel, established by Congress in 1991, on having all children begin school "ready to learn" by the year 2000 called on early childhood personnel to define this "readiness" and articulate what was needed. Hyson credits the Goal 1 Technical Planning Group as the first to use the term "Approaches toward Learning" in their work *Reconsidering Children's Early Learning and Development: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary* (Kagan, Moore & Bredekamp, 1995). This group included the concept as one of the necessary dimensions in children's early learning and development.

Whether we call this construct "engagement", or some other term, the idea is frequently discussed in researching and describing important attributes we observe in children associated with quality learning environments. Katz (1995) used the term "disposition", in establishing important goals for young children's learning. Fantuzzo, et. al (2004) describes "learning behaviors" that identify attitude, eagerness and initiative in young children's classroom learning experiences. Others have defined engagement based

on the quantity of time children spend interacting in a developmentally appropriate manner with their environment (McWilliam & Bailey, 1995, Ridley, McWilliam & Oates, 2000). All seem to agree that is important and crucial as part of children's educational process.

Hyson (2008) describes "enthusiastic" learners displaying "interest", "pleasure" and "motivation to learn" as key components reflected in high quality early childhood classrooms. She identifies the framework for encouraging and supporting "enthusiastic and engaged learners" as having two main areas for children: 1) emotion/motivation (enthusiasm) and 2) action/behavior (engagement). In this framework, enthusiasm represents the emotional feelings based dimension for children. It is observed through children's interest and curiosity, through their expressed pleasure and enjoyment of activities, and through their inherent motivation to explore and investigate. All of these attributes of young children need support, encouragement and nurturing from their environment and surroundings to produce high quality learning experiences.

A second dimension of Hyson's framework is described as being observed through behaviors of young children. This equally important dimension, Engagement, is further defined through children's attention, persistence, flexibility and self-regulation. Children's attention or their ability to focus on the activity at hand, even in the presence of distractions indicates their engagement. Another indicator of engagement is a child's continuation of an activity, even when it is difficult. This persistence indicates an ability to deal with frustration. Flexibility, the third component used to describe engagement is evidenced through use of varying strategies or tactics to solve problems or complete

activities. Finally, Hyson includes a child's ability to regulate their own emotions, behavior, etc. or their self-regulation in her framework as one of the components of engagement. This particular component also includes a child's ability to plan and to guide their own learning.

Fantuzzo, et. al (2004) described approaches to learning as the mechanism for children to become engaged in the learning process. These "approaches" were defined through specific, observable behaviors of children in early childhood settings identified in the Preschool Learning Behavior Scale (PLBS; McDermott, Green, Frances & Stott, 2002). Analysis and use of the PLBS has consistently confirmed three factors from the list of items: (1) Competence Motivation, including items related to children's eagerness to learn, their initiative, and their desire to understand the tasks at hand, (2) Attention/Persistence, including children's abilities to stay focused on tasks and sustain attention, and (3) Attitude toward Learning, including their inventiveness in procedures for tasks and their use of their own ideas as well as acceptance of assistance when needed. (McDermott, 1984; Coolahan, et.al, 2000; Fantuzzo, et.al, 2004).

The PLBS was derived from an earlier scale used in elementary school settings with older children. McDermott (1984) and McDermott & Beitman (1984) had earlier identified somewhat similar factors in the Study of Children's Learning Styles (SCLS) used with elementary school children. Principal Component factor analysis had revealed three dimensions for this sixteen item scale: Avoidant, Inattentive, and Overly Independent. The Avoidant dimension accounted for 50.6% of the variance with the two additional categories contributing a cumulative total of 66.2% of the explained variance.

Behaviors such as being overly nervous, withdrawn in class, unable to settle down, giving answers that indicate inattention, seeming uninterested, avoiding completion of tasks and refusal of help when needed were included in this early scale. This scale attempted to describe the absence of preferred behaviors and the presence of competing behaviors for what others have identified as engagement.

The concept of Approaches to Learning is also included in the domains identified in North Carolina's preschool standards, *Foundations: Early Learning Standards for Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding their Success*. The importance given to the "how" of learning that was expressed in the work of the Goal 1 Technical Planning Group (Kagan, et al, 1995) is noted by inclusion of this domain as necessary part of defining what is important for children in preschool educational settings. In this document, interest or engagement of children in their own learning is exhibited in various ways including their "persistence, attentiveness, and responsibility", as well as their display of "eagerness" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004).

The task force responsible for the creation of *Foundations* in describing the skills and abilities important for children's success includes a child's attitude toward learning, or approach to learning. This domain is given equal emphasis to cognitive, language, physical and social/emotional development in this document. Fostering of the naturally occurring curiosity in young children and encouraging their eagerness to learn about their world is to be included in programs offering high quality environments for young children. This overarching domain is to be expressed in all curriculum areas and is reflective of the idea that how children learn is equally important as what they learn.

The work of all of these authors helps to frame this rather subjective construct of “engagement” of young children in the learning process. The importance of “how” children learn and “how” teachers teach is inherent in a deeper understanding of this concept and what it includes.

Importance of Engagement

Given that agreed upon definitions are basic to better understanding the concept of quality environments, it is equally important to acknowledge why children’s engagement in the learning process matters. McDermott (1984) examined the role that a child’s learning style contributed along with IQ toward the academic achievement of elementary school children. One hundred children had measures of their IQ and learning styles given in the fall of their Kindergarten year. Their learning style was measured using a scale of teacher observed learning behaviors grouped into three dimensions: Avoidant, Inattentive, and Overly Independent. Fifteen months later, the academic success of these children was measured using both standardized tests and teacher grades given in reading, language and mathematics. This study found that while IQ was the better predictor of academic success in first grade, the learning behaviors offered prediction beyond IQ and in some instances interacted with IQ to improve prediction, particularly in reading and language skills. The identified learning behaviors seemed to assist in predicting academic success.

Fantuzzo, Perry & McDermott (2004) examined learning behaviors of preschoolers in an urban Head Start setting. Use of the Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale (PBLs) was compared with information from three separate sources: teacher

report, direct observation and parent report. Their findings confirmed the three separate factors that had been identified during the development of the scale (McDermott, et al., 2000) and also examined the relationship of these factors to other competencies identified as important for children's learning.

The PLBS is a twenty-nine item scale completed by teachers for individual children. Items ask teachers to rate children according to behaviors such as their willingness to try new tasks, the degree of their dependence on adults (Competence Motivation), their distractibility and how attentive they are, (Attention/Persistence) and use of their own ideas, flexibility, and willingness to accept help (Attitude).

Findings from this study indicated that preschoolers who displayed high Attention/Persistence and positive Attitudes toward Learning were also high in their ability to control their emotions and play in a positive manner with their peers. In addition children rated as having high Competence Motivation were found to be more autonomous, independent learners. The three factors were also found to have significant correlations with children's language abilities, although these correlations were not particularly strong.

More recently, a study with low-income Head Start children again indicated the association of these learning behaviors with school readiness skills (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, et al, 2007). In this study, the three factors from the PLBS were combined with five factors identified in the Adjustment Scale Preschool Intervention (ASPI), a lengthy measure for determining early social emotion classroom behavior. An underlying structure for these two instruments was sought and two dimensions were identified

though a two factor orthogonal solution: Regulated Behavior and Academically Disengaged Behavior. Regulated Behavior included demonstration of focused attention, persistence toward task and a positive attitude toward learning, while the Academically Disengaged Behavior included a lack of Competence Motivation on the PLBS and socially withdrawn behaviors.

In this study, Regulated Behavior in the fall was positively associated with readiness outcomes, including mathematic skills, cognitive skills, social skills and coordinated movement measured in the spring. Academically Disengaged Behavior in the fall was negatively associated with mathematic, cognitive, social skills and coordinated movement measures in the spring. In addition, children with poor regulated behavior or high disengaged behavior were also more likely to be identified as “at risk” for academic failure as they ended their year before Kindergarten.

Stipek & Ryan (1997) examined the role of “motivation” as it related to school readiness for economically disadvantaged young children. This study evaluated the anxiety, self-confidence, and attitude toward school of children as measures of motivation and readiness to learn. While they found significant differences between children’s cognitive abilities when comparing economically advantaged and disadvantaged children, there were very few differences in the motivation to learn based on their economic status.

Structural elements and engagement. In comparison to these studies focusing on individual children’s engagement and outcomes, Ridley, McWilliam & Oates (2000) found group engagement to be correlated with a child care centers’ level of licensing.

Group engagement was calculated using repeated observations of the percentages of children that were disengaged (upset, crying, fighting, non-attentive, etc.) at specific points in time compared to the total number of children present. Attention to children's affect, their visual focus and their attention to activities were used as definitions of engagement. Comparing programs licensed through a two-tier system, they found that programs operating at the higher levels had greater levels of engagement. In addition, significant correlations were found between the levels of engagement and program quality measures.

Rimm-Kauffman, La Paro, Downer & Pianta (2005) explored the association of classroom setting and children's engagement, compliance and cooperation in Kindergarten classrooms. The choice of whole class or small group instruction was used as the measure of classroom setting and children's behaviors were measured by a time sampling method that captured information on a specific target child. Results indicated that children's engagement, specifically on-task behavior was related to the classroom setting. Children in small group settings displayed greater levels of on-task behavior. In addition, small group settings provided more positive peer interaction. The possibility of classroom quality providing a moderating effect on these relationships was also explored as part of this study. The findings indicated that higher quality was associated with greater compliance and fewer problem behaviors in whole class teacher directed activities. In addition, higher quality was also associated with more frequent positive peer interactions in small group settings.

In a later study, outside observers who rated children's engagement and measured their level of remaining on-task, found a relationship between engagement and classroom quality (Rimm-Kauffman, et. al, 2009). The teacher's ability to provide effective classroom management as a part of the overall quality was particularly important. Classroom management also was linked to children's self-control abilities and the amount of time they were on-task in classroom activities. Based on studies such as these, we can determine that children's engagement is an important component within the learning process. It is, therefore, important to better understand factors that seem to promote higher levels of children's engagement in the learning process, which are addressed in the following section.

Teacher Practices and Child Engagement

Hyson presents tools to support the development of engagement and enthusiasm in children, as well as barriers that may be present in classrooms. Included in the tools she identifies as supports are effective classroom environments and effective teaching practices (p. 85). The effective environment includes the physical layout, organization and ability to use materials independently, as well as routines, schedules and use of small group instructional activities. Others also point out the important links between classroom management, instructional setting, and classroom quality with children's engagement (Rimm-Kauffman, et. al,2009, Rimm-Kauffman, et al, 2005)

Hyson (2008) also identifies the importance of the teachers' use of practices, including modeling, emphasizing learning goals, scaffolding and assisting learning, as well as creating meaningful and challenging choices. Rushed and inflexible schedules, as

well as over reliance on extrinsic rewards for motivators are identified as barriers for development of engagement and enthusiasm in children's approaches to learning.

In the following section, some of the specific areas of practice and research that supports these areas are identified. It should be noted that much of the research available in these areas has not been completed in preschool classrooms, but there are implications that can be drawn from these findings for other settings. Findings from this research can help us identify what factors might be important within early childhood settings as we seek to define and measure aspects of early childhood teaching practices that can promote children's engagement in learning.

Community. A small group of elementary school educators in 1981 created a foundation to offer support for including elements in classrooms that support the "how" of teaching. This group, through the North East Foundation for Children (NEFC) developed a set of guiding principles and classroom practices aimed at integrating social and academic learning (North East Foundation for Children, 1998). The Responsive Classroom Approach is the resulting outcome of their efforts. This approach includes practices designed to help build a sense of belonging and community between classmates, provide classroom organization that encourages responsibility and creativity, as well as promote active learning. Techniques advocated include a morning group meeting with a purpose of sharing events and providing time for greeting, allowing students to create classroom rules, use of choice for activities and logical consequences for behavior, as well as positive teacher language. The teacher's role is central to this approach both in establishing and using the practices that encourage community building and a sense of

cohesiveness, as well as modeling the behaviors sought from the children in her/his interactions within the classroom.

Research indicates elementary students in classrooms utilizing this approach when compared to non-Responsive classrooms have greater increases in mathematics and reading test scores, better social skills, and feel more positive about school (Elliot, 1995; Elliot, 1999; Rimm-Kauffman, et al 2006). While early study of this approach was focused on comparison of two schools and over a one or two year span of time, more recent findings come from a quasi-experimental design in one school district with 6 schools participating (Rimm-Kauffman, et al, 2006). Three schools utilized the Responsive Classroom Approach and three did not participate. Change in social skills for these studies used the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS, Gresham & Elliot 1990), as well as questionnaires developed for review of the Responsive Classroom Approach. Academic growth was drawn from results of standardized tests administered through the school systems. While significant differences in cognitive skills related to mathematics and reading, as well as more positive social skills and attitudes toward schools did appear, the findings were not present when compared at the end of one year. However, comparison of test scores and outcomes after two and three years using this approach revealed significant differences between the two groups.

Related to a sense of community or belonging are those interactions that occur between children within a classroom. How children interact with their peers can help build or be deterrents to creating a sense of community. The importance of peer interaction and classroom engagement as measured by the PLBS was examined by

Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott (2000). The PLBS teacher ratings were compared to the frequency of a variety of different peer interactions and negative classroom behaviors such as conduct problems, hyperactive behavior, and not paying attention. This study found positive play between peers to be associated with active engagement in the activities in the classroom, and lack of this positive play to be associated with inattention, lack of motivation and passivity. Children displaying high levels of disruptive peer play were, not surprisingly, also having high levels of problem behaviors in other classroom activities. While only one component of the variables that can contribute to a sense of community, peer relationships seem to have a strong association with a child's engagement in other activities based on this study.

In addition, the work by Rimm-Kauffman, et al (2005) indicates that teachers can impact the degree of positive peer interactions through choosing to offer small group instruction settings. These small group settings not only were associated with more positive peer relations than whole group settings, but also resulted in more on-task behaviors from children. Higher quality in classrooms also had a positive relationship with peer interactions.

A meta-analysis of social, self-concept and behavioral outcomes for elementary school children taking part in peer assisted learning (PAL) interventions also suggests the important role that peers can play for older elementary children (Ginsburg-Black, Rohreck, Fantuzzo, 2006). Findings from thirty-six relevant studies were reviewed. The review of these studies revealed social and self-concept outcomes for elementary school

students were positively correlated with academic outcomes for students in the PAL programs.

Conclusion

It is most often easier to identify “what” we need to learn than “how” we will best learn new concepts. We have gained knowledge about the ties between our emotions, our social relationships and our learning. The people around us, the manner of communication used by our teachers, the interactions we have with our peers and the physical environment all play a role in our education. When this is added to our individual learning styles, culture, and unique physiological development, we are faced with a very complex task to provide educational settings that are of high quality for all children. Perhaps even more complex is the task of developing consistent, reliable, agreed upon methods for measuring this complex process of teaching and learning within early childhood settings.

CHAPTER III

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to provide insights into the aspects of learning environments that “matter” or are important for children’s engagement in learning. These insights were foundational for efforts to develop a tool or measure that can be used to document classroom practices associated with higher levels of children’s engagement. The desire for this study was to first identify those important contributors to children’s learning and then begin attempts to identify how these components may appear in classrooms and how we might document their presence. In the broadest sense, the goal of this study was to provide insights into the question “What strategies and practices are used by teachers in preschool classrooms where children are engaged and enjoying learning?” More specifically, the study sought to explore the following questions:

- 1) What aspects of the learning environment have been identified through research and recommendations for best practices as key features to promote children’s engagement?
- 2) From the perspective of early childhood professionals with extensive experience observing in classrooms, what features of the learning environment emerge as important for promoting children’s engagement?

- 3) Are there consistencies between the constructs identified through research and recommendations for best practices and the constructs identified by the experienced early childhood professionals?
- 4) What examples of the identified practices and features of the learning environment are observed in early childhood classrooms?

Based on information gained from multiple sources related to these questions, attempts were made to refine and clarify those features of the learning environment supporting and promoting children's engagement. An assumption inherent in this study, was that a better identification of important components should lead to a means of measuring or assessing constructs associated with these components. A deeper understanding of what "matters" is a necessary first step toward attempts to measure or at least provide mechanisms for identifying the presence or absence of constructs. These attempts were incorporated into revisions of a tool to help define and operationalize practices teachers could use in classrooms to promote engagement.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

General Strategy

A multi-level qualitative study was designed to better understand specific teacher practices occurring in preschool classrooms where children are engaged in the learning process and are enthusiastic about participating in the classroom activities. The desire for this study was not to identify cause and effect relationships, but to clarify and describe what is happening in classrooms identified as providing high quality experiences for children. Specifically, attempts were made to operationalize constructs related to teacher practices occurring in quality settings where children are engaged in learning, and to provide a preliminary tool useful for measurement.

For the initial data collection phase of the study, interviews with individuals familiar with a variety of classrooms were sought. Two separate focus group interviews were held with ten individuals working as assessors for a state-wide child care evaluation project. Given that the foremost objective of this part of the process was to gain information from individuals regarding their perspective on the topic of quality and engagement of children, a phenomenological approach was utilized. Creswell (1998) discusses the use of this approach when there is a belief that an underlying meaning exists. It is the search for this “essential” meaning through an examination of the

perspective of individuals involved in a particular phenomenon. The ultimate goal is to better understand the “essence” of meaning held by the individuals of their experience.

Secondly, in addition to the analysis of information shared by assessors working in classrooms, a review and alignment of current literature with suggested teacher practices, including those identified in the first phase of the study, was also completed. This process allowed for comparison of the data with important constructs related to child engagement identified by early childhood scholars and researchers.

Finally, direct observations of classrooms were completed, using the identified constructs as a guide. This method of observational case study as identified by Bogdan & Biklen (2003) provided an opportunity to focus on the identified constructs and practices utilized in selected classrooms. Field notes were recorded that related to the identified practices and constructs. The focus in this particular phase of the study was on clarifying, and seeking practical examples of the items of interest. This part of the study also contributed significantly to the secondary focus of the study related to developing a preliminary tool for measuring important classroom practices.

Preliminary Tool

Prior to gathering data for this study, a preliminary tool was developed that provided a framework for the subsequent phases of the study. Information gathered during the creation of this tool guided the questions asked during the focus groups and also guided the classroom observations. The items on the tool were revised throughout the process of gathering data during the study, including the focus group discussions, alignment with current literature, and the classroom observations. This beginning

preliminary tool was compiled through a survey of the existing literature and instrumentation that includes teacher practices related to facilitation of interaction and encouragement of children's engagement in early childhood settings. Much of this information is within the area of social emotional areas of children's development or teacher-child interaction measures. For example, the *Inventory of Practices for Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Competence* (CSEFEL, 2003) is a quite extensive instrument aimed at providing a means to identify areas of needed training for classroom teachers. While only a small section of the complete inventory, one area is identified as "preventive practices" and includes the teaching skill "designs activities to promote engagement". This pattern of "present at a minimal level" is true in other scales seeking to address very broad areas or global issues within a classroom. An initial review of measures for assessing quality in early childhood programs published by Child Trends (Halle & Vick, 2007) revealed that none of the scales identified focused specifically on the practices used by teachers to maintain interest and engagement over the course of the educational day. However, many of the scales reviewed contain some items recognizing the importance of similar practices. The concepts and ideas found in these portions of existing instruments, as well as literature addressing teacher practices guided the creation of the original preliminary tool used in this study. This tool is included in the Appendix on Table 1.

Focus Groups

A phenomenological approach is most applicable when there are individuals who have experienced a similar phenomenon, in this case assessment and evaluation of

multiple classrooms. The focus of a phenomenological approach is to gather data from individuals familiar with the topic of interest and then analyze the data in a manner to bring deeper meaning and greater understanding. Creswell (1998) suggests a process of data analysis that involves a “reduction” of and focus on specific statements in attempts to reveal meaning. Many suggest the process for this analysis should include specific steps. These steps guide the researcher toward a refined framework for the information from the perspectives shared by participants (Cresswell, 1998; DeCastro, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Giorgi suggested a four step process for analysis that begins with dividing the data into “meaning units”, transforming these units, bringing situated (or contextual) structure to the data, and finally providing general structure statements (De Castro, 2003). The following section describes the focus group participants, the focus group interview process and how data were analyzed using Giorgio’s four step process.

Recruitment Procedures

Twenty-five individuals working regularly as part of a quality assessment project were solicited to participate in focus groups and interviews. Participation in this study was open to any assessor working with the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project (NCRLAP) and each individual was invited though an email and given information regarding the study. Those indicating a willingness to participate were asked to sign a consent form and provide basic demographic information. They were assured their participation and contributions would have no negative consequences for employment. Each discussion was held during regular work hours for the assessors, but no additional compensation was offered for participation.

Participants

For the ten NCRLAP assessors participating in the study, the average length of early childhood experience was over 17 years. Their education ranged from bachelor degrees through masters level. All of the participants were female and the majority (80 %) listed their ethnicity as white or Caucasian, while the remaining 20 % indicated they were African American or black.

Participants were all trained assessors working as part of the NCRLAP. Assessors with the NCRLAP typically conduct three assessments per week using global classroom quality instruments. The work of these individuals requires them to be good observers. They are highly trained on use of the Environment Rating Scales used as part of the North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project (NCRLAP), including the Early Childhood Rating Scale, Revised, (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998), the Infant Toddler Rating Scale, Revised, (ITERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003), the School Age Childcare Rating Scale, (SACERS; Harms, T., Jacobs, E. & White, D., 1996), and the Family Child Care Rating Scale (FDCRS; Harms, T. & Clifford, R., 1989). Prior to beginning their work collecting data for use in determining the Rated License issued by the Division of Child Development in North Carolina they must establish 85% or higher reliability with trainers for the project. In addition, on-going reliability must be demonstrated at this level and is tracked through routine reliability checks by other trained assessors. Average reliability demonstrated through these routine quality checks for the assessors is over 90%.

Interview protocol and procedures

The ideas of assessors involved in this state-wide quality rating system were solicited through open-ended questions regarding observations of strategies used by teachers. Their ideas on critical and important practices contributing to quality, increased engagement of children, and decreased time children spend waiting on activities or routines in preschool classrooms were discussed as part of two separate focus groups. One of the focus groups was conducted during a regularly scheduled meeting for the Regional Coordinators with the NCRLAP on a university campus, and a second discussion held in conjunction with a scheduled training session in the home of one of the assessors. The regional coordinator meeting had a total of seven participants and the second discussion had three assessors present. Each discussion lasted approximately one hour. Questions used in the focus groups are included in Table 2 in the Appendix. The questions were designed to guide the discussions toward recollections of experiences in quality child care classrooms. The initial questions were broad and addressed positive experiences during their work; times they felt they had observed quality classrooms or been impressed by a teacher. More narrowly focused questions specifically addressing engagement of children were designed for the later parts of the discussion.

Data Analysis for Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were audio recorded and written transcripts created. It should be noted that the researcher has experience working in early childhood settings and has opinions regarding components of quality learning environments for young children. As described by Cresswell (1990), attempts were made to “bracket” these

opinions and to focus on the specific words and statements used by the assessors.

Procedures as noted below were used to provide assurance that the information presented was from the participants', rather than the researcher's, perspective. Frequent revisiting of the transcripts and words used by assessors helped assure reflection of their statements and meaning.

Transcripts were analyzed to identify common themes, ideas, and thoughts expressed by the assessors as part of the reduction process used in phenomenological research. Meaningful phrases from the discussions were highlighted on written transcripts and then transferred into an excel document using separate sheets for each group. This process resulted in a list of phrases such as "teachers who are storytellers", "let them play", "follow the children's lead", "could tell she had a plan", "(children) got to do meaningful work", "space makes the children feel important", "if they want to play, let them play", "found what worked, and she kept it going", etc.

A total of 321 phrases were derived from the two focus group discussions. While both discussions lasted approximately one hour, one group was larger with seven individuals participating and three in the second group. This is likely the reason behind a slight difference in the number of phrases from the two groups, with one having 184 phrases and the other 137.

The individual phrases were then labeled according to the central idea expressed, similar to the "meaning units" described by De Castro (2003). For example, "adjusts her style to meet the needs of the children" and "putting the kids first" were both labeled as *Responsiveness*, "kids worked together", "children have ownership" and "children are

reflected in the room” were labeled as *Sense of Community*, and descriptions of teachers such as, “sense of doing something important”, “received pleasure from being in that environment”, “likes her job” were labeled *Enjoyment*. Labeling of the phrases was done chronologically, following the transcripts of the discussions. This allowed for greater contextual emphasis from the discussion to be used in the labeling, while also identifying more subtle changes in meaning that might appear from use of specific words or phrases in the discussion. It was often the case that phrases held meaning related to the conversation at that point in time and this contextual information guided the labeling or clustering of the phrases. Periodic and frequent review of the transcripts during this part of the analysis was completed to assure accuracy.

This process resulted in a list of 23 themes or labels for the phrases derived from the transcripts. This list was then reviewed to determine which themes appeared most frequently and to determine the degree of overlap of themes between the two focus groups. This review was completed to determine if there were differences between the identified constructs from the two groups, or if similar ideas emerged from the discussions. Major differences would indicate the need for additional interviews to clarify ideas related to quality and engagement. Many overlapping themes emerged between the two groups with very few ideas appearing in only one of the group discussions. This was used as an indication that the participant level was sufficient for the purposes identified.

A review of the combined constructs and themes resulting from the two focus groups was done to assure fidelity of labels. Specific attention was paid to those themes

with potentially similar definitions, such as *Responsiveness/Flexibility*, or *DAP/Interests of Children*. This review was done by listing the most pertinent phrases related to each theme and comparing the presented ideas to determine if there were truly separate meanings that could be drawn from the phrases. Table 3 in the Appendix indicates the phrases used to assign labels for themes.

This review held that most of the constructs contained separate, identifiable ideas and should be kept as distinct labels. For example, even though *Flexibility* and *Responsiveness* were both related to the idea of changing one's actions, *Responsiveness* included the idea that the change was directly connected to the needs of the children in the classroom. *Flexibility* was a more general leaning toward change, ("go with the flow", "not restrictive"). Similarly, even though the theme *Interests of Children* included the idea of responsiveness, these comments were specific to the classroom activities and educational interests of the children rather than expressed needs ("knowing the children in the group", "expand on ideas", etc.). *DAP* was used to reflect an understanding of children and educational practices in general that were not necessarily directly related to the specific group of children ("uses assessment and planning", "eliminate reasons for conflict", etc.) *Capabilities* of children reflected the idea of respect for children's abilities when teachers gave the children "real jobs", or "tools to handle conflicts", or "let them figure things out".

Alignment of Constructs

After identifying the themes from the focus group discussions a comparison of the themes with recommended teacher practices was completed. While there are many

publications offering guidance for determining qualities that are important to include in learning environments for young children, three seemed most applicable for this study. One offered a broad national perspective, the second was created by early childhood professionals in the same state as the assessors participating in the initial phase of the study, and a third source gave a unique perspective of student recollection of teacher qualities. Each source is described below.

The largest professional organization in the country for early childhood educators, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been the most prominent source of information related to best practices for children age birth through age eight for many years. This organization has offered a method for identifying quality child care programs through their Accreditation of Programs for Young Children since 1985, and has recently released the Third Edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Throughout the years, NAEYC has solicited feedback and review of the standards and practices offered as guidelines from early childhood scholars, practicing professionals, and researchers. The most recent edition offers five key areas that are offered as guidelines for making decisions regarding practices for early childhood classrooms. The first key area offered is “Creating a caring community of learners”. Other key areas contain guidance on “teaching to enhance development”, curriculum planning, assessment of children, and building relationships with families. For each of the five key areas, “Examples to Consider” are offered with specific teacher practices that are considered to be developmentally appropriate.

In addition to the information provided for practitioners and families by NAEYC many states have produced documents outlining learning standards for young children. These standards provide guidance for teachers and other early childhood practitioners in creating quality learning environments. In North Carolina, a state-wide task force developed *Foundations: Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding Their Success* (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004). This document promotes using identified “Widely Held Expectations” to “support appropriate teaching practices and provide a guide for gauging children’s progress” and to “Provide a common set of expectations for preschool children’s development...” (p. 5)

5) Members of the task force identified the domains considered necessary for inclusion in programs for preschool children and included Cognitive Development, Language Development and Communication, Health and Physical Development, Emotional and Social Development, and Approaches to Learning.

Similar to the NAEYC Accreditation standards, this group included the importance of “how” children are taught, as well as “what” they are taught. The significance of the “how” is demonstrated by listing “Approaches to Learning” as the first domain and the emphasis given to considering the “whole child” in use of the standards. The authors of this document indicate their definition of Approaches to Learning “includes children’s attitudes toward, and interest in, learning” and can be seen in all areas of curriculum and across all the other domains (p. 15). Included in this document are specific goals/assumptions for each domain which are labeled as Widely

Held Expectations. In addition, suggested strategies for early educators and for parents are included for each domain.

While NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the NC Early Learning Standards both provided input from a range of sources including educators, teachers, administrators, and parents, a recent publication took a different approach toward identifying qualities that matter for students. Walker (2008) asked university students enrolled in teacher education programs to share the qualities of their most memorable teachers, those individuals who were role-models and encouraged the students to seek to become teachers. The perspectives of these students were included in this part of the study based on the assumption that their recollections included teachers utilizing effective practices. While not necessarily in preschool settings, the educational environments these teachers had created engaged students to the extent that they were now seeking to become teachers. Their memories of these individuals had inspired their career choices and represented important components related to positive, quality experiences for their students.

Over the span of fifteen years and more than one thousand student essays, Walker collected the comments, impressions and statements made in response to the question: "What were the qualities of the most memorable teacher who encouraged you to teach?" Students participating included undergraduate and graduate students, and traditional as well as non-traditional students. Many different disciplines were represented over the course of the fifteen years, however most were early childhood students. In addition, the students were enrolled in colleges in the United States, Canada, Bermuda and the

Caribbean, in predominantly white and historically black institutions, in public and private colleges, and in four year institutions and technical colleges. Responses from these students were compiled and themes identified. These frequently mentioned characteristics are listed below:

1. Prepared. These individuals were organized and ready for each day. Their students recounted that “time flew” due to their engagement in the classroom.
2. Positive. Teachers would feel free to give recognition and praise when deserved and were optimistic toward their students and about teaching.
3. Hold High Expectations. Students always felt challenged and encouraged to reach their potential.
4. Creative. These teachers were always resourceful and constantly creating new inventive methods to use with their students.
5. Fair. The classroom was operated with clear requirements and students felt they had equal opportunities for success.
6. Display Personal Touch. These teachers were able to make personal connections with students and were described as approachable.
7. Cultivate Sense of Belonging. Students reported they felt like they “belonged” and always were given a sense of being welcomed in their classrooms.
8. Compassionate. These teachers were seen as caring individuals who displayed sensitivity to their students.

9. Sense of Humor. While never laughing at students, they frequently laughed with them and found ways to ease uncomfortable moments with humor.
10. Respect Students. A great deal of respect for individual privacy was offered and steps were taken to offer feedback and constructive criticism without embarrassing students.
11. Forgiving. These teachers were never observed to hold a grudge and found ways to start each class offering a “clean slate”.
12. Admit Mistakes. Students remembered that these individuals were willing to apologize when needed and to admit when they had made an error.

These three sources, NAEYC’s Developmentally Appropriate Practice, the NC Early Learning Standards, and Walker’s Characteristics of Effective Teachers provided the basis for comparison with the themes from the focus group discussions and the preliminary tool developed for use in classroom observations.

Since the focus of this analysis was on teacher practices, for both the NC Early Learning Standards and the NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines, the sections with specific recommendations for teachers were used. The list of Strategies for Early Educators listed under the Approaches to Learning domain in the NC Early Learning Standards was utilized along with the practices for teachers outlined in the “Examples to Consider” chapter of the NAEYC guidelines. In addition, those characteristics of effective teachers identified by Walker (2008) were aligned with the other sources. While this list is reflective of student recollections of characteristics of

their teachers rather than practices, many of the items in the list reflect what teachers did in their classrooms, as well as their personal characteristics.

Similar constructs, suggested practices, themes from the discussions and the items listed on the preliminary tool were compared and aligned. This information was used to provide confirmation of the importance of the items on the tool and the themes derived from the discussion groups. The preliminary tool was then used as a framework for the final stage of the study where field observations were completed in preschool classrooms.

Classroom Observations

As a final phase of the study, classroom observations were conducted in local preschool classrooms. This part of the study was completed in order to provide an additional source of information and confirmation of the constructs, themes and dimensions drawn from the focus group interviews and current literature. In addition, the observations were used to further clarify and expand upon the identified practices by collecting specific examples of teacher practices that are consistent with the identified constructs.

Recruitment Procedures

Phone calls and emails to local center directors seeking their participation were completed. A variety of program types and operational structures were targeted, along with varying NC Rated License levels. Directors indicating interest in having their programs participate were provided a letter detailing the study protocol as well as purposes of the study. They were then asked to sign a letter indicating their agreement. In addition, directors were provided a letter and consent forms for preschool teachers in

their program. The letter for teachers provided information on the study and the purposes of the research. Two copies of the consent form were provided along with a short demographic survey for the teacher to complete. An information letter for families explaining the study and indicating the classroom teacher's participation was also provided for each child in the participating classrooms.

Participants

Participant characteristics. Participants included eight teachers from five different classrooms. The teachers held a range of education levels from high school through masters in early childhood education. One teacher had completed high school and two teachers indicated they had early childhood credentials which may be obtained following completion of two community college courses. Two other teachers had completed Associates degrees, one in early childhood and one in a non-early childhood area. One teacher had a non-early childhood four year degree and there were two teachers with masters level degrees in the early childhood field. One of the teachers was African American and the rest of the teachers were white/Caucasian. The average experience in the early childhood field for the group was over seventeen years.

Program characteristics. The programs employing the teachers included centers that were privately owned, faith-based, and operated by a local community college. Participating program operations reflected full-day, half-day, and an extended day operation at one employer-sponsored program. All but one of the classrooms observed enrolled children ages 3 to 5 years. The one exception was a group of children who were two years of age, with many close to three years old. One program was not participating

in the licensing regulatory system, and the additional programs were four or five star programs under North Carolina's Rated License system.

The settings used for observations varied not only in program type, but also in classroom style and operation. One classroom had 23 children with two teachers and two additional adults in a very large open space with multiple areas for children's use. Another classroom was quite small in size and had one teacher with 9 children enrolled. While these represented the two extremes in enrollment and in available space, there were also variations in between. Most classrooms observed had two adults present for the majority of the observation, and the average number of children present was 15.6.

Classroom Observation Protocol and Procedures

A total of seven observations were completed in the five different classrooms. Two classrooms were observed for a second time on two separate days. In one classroom, the teachers felt the initial observation had not been typical for their classroom and invited the researcher to return. For the second classroom, much of the morning had involved a chapel program and the researcher requested to return.

Observations generally lasted between two and three hours and were held during the morning activity time. The preliminary tool described earlier was used during the observations as a framework for focusing on the constructs of interest. For example, the general frequency level of teachers smiling, laughing or using gentle humor was noted. Transition strategies used to assist children during change of activities in the classroom were observed, along with the types and frequency of conversations between or among adults and children. Special attention was paid to what was happening and the teaching

practices occurring when children seemed especially interested or excited about activities in the classroom. Examples of practices or strategies that related to the identified constructs and strategies were noted and recorded. In addition, important practices that facilitated children's involvement in learning activities that were not reflected on the list of constructs were documented, along with practices that presented significant barriers to engagement. In addition, any needed revisions to the preliminary tool were noted, including clarification of wording, additional items needed, items that seemed unnecessary and possible ideas for measurement strategies.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Visitors to early childhood programs of high quality have been heard to describe their experience as being in a “place that just feels good”. This study has been an attempt to identify at least some of the particulars related to this subjective view of quality. We know that with all we have learned and now understand about indicators of quality, there is much that we do not yet understand. The first part of the study captured the experiences of early childhood professionals and used their perspectives of observations in multiple classrooms as a source of knowledge. In addition, a review of national and state-wide standards, and observations of classrooms extended and refined this knowledge. Through this process, confirmation of important constructs and strategies related to children’s learning was gained. Of particular importance were the ideas that teachers’ abilities to create a *Sense of Community* and their *Responsiveness* to children were central to the presence of engagement in learning. Affirmation of the importance of “how” teachers teach as well as “what” they teach came from the focus group participants, as well as the current literature.

A secondary purpose of this study was to examine possible items or criteria that might be useful for assessing classrooms and assemble into a preliminary tool. The intent was to use the knowledge gained from experiences and our existing research to find ways that better articulate and define the constructs recognized as important to children’s

learning in classroom environments. Classroom observations conducted in varying preschool learning environments revealed limited occurrences of important constructs identified in the first stage of the study. This resulted in collection of fewer examples, as well as less expansion and clarification opportunities for the desired items. This was particularly true for items related to *Sense of Community* and *Responsiveness* which were the two most prominent themes from the focus group discussions. Further observations could help determine if the low occurrence of these constructs is related to the items chosen and language used in the preliminary tool or to an actual lack of presence of these constructs in preschool classrooms. There is evidence as noted in later discussion below that both factors could be present.

The first section below includes findings from the focus group discussions, including identified themes and the ideas represented by them. This section also includes information on how the specific themes were grouped into four broader dimensions related to quality: 1) “Process of Teaching”, 2) “Knowledge Base” for teaching, 3) “Plan for Teaching”, and 4) “Program”.

The second section documents the manner in which the themes from the discussion groups, current national and state standards, results from a recent qualitative study and items on the preliminary tool align. Confirmation for the importance of the constructs and their presence in multiple publications indicates the need for use of these ideas to guide our assessment of quality environments.

In the third section, the results from field observations in preschool classrooms are provided. Observation notes related to the observable Dimensions of quality and

associated themes are included in this section. As mentioned earlier, the classroom observations produced limited examples of the identified constructs, but did offer important considerations for future study and refinement of constructs.

Finally, the revisions made to the preliminary tool created prior to the data collection are detailed in the fourth section. This work was on-going throughout the study and this section includes specific item revisions, as well as thoughts on overall measurement ideas gained through the processes used.

Focus groups

Observations Regarding the Focus Group Process

Focus group discussions with the NCRLAP assessors were lively and energetic. These individuals shared strong opinions regarding their views on important components of quality classrooms for young children. Comments reflected the participants' feelings and views of the importance of teacher practices to children's classroom experiences and overall development. They identified many practices teachers use to provide high quality care. Unfortunately, many of participants' comments indicated that they felt these important qualities are rarely seen. One individual commented that really high quality classrooms were "few and far between".

While the initial discussion questions were designed to elicit positive examples of practices and strategies observed during their work, many of the assessors began by relating their personal experiences with child care for their own children. Since the setting they had chosen for their child was seen as high quality, they may have more easily recalled these examples. As the discussion progressed they recalled more ideas

gained from assessments of classrooms that they have completed as part of their role with the NCRLAP, but initially offered examples from their personal experiences rather than work experiences. One individual even related experiences from her college internship experiences in response to a question regarding important teacher practices.

It was of interest to note that many of the assessors with children had opted to enroll their own child in family child care homes rather than center-based care. One assessor related her experience: “I remember one of the first FCCERS I did at Wilmington. I had been through a lot of not really good places at the time and I remember thinking at that time....what am I going to do when I have a baby? I cannot leave them in child care. And then going to this place where I thought well maybe I could.....leave them here.” Others commented similarly, “I think one of my best experiences was in a family childcare home, too” and “I came to know Ms. Nina because I was training on the FCCERS with T and that was one of the places we were to go to do one of our practices. I thought to myself....my son’s got to be here” or “I think for me I had done so many assessments where I sat and listened to babies cry...and the thought of my child crying I could not bear it. So that was why I knew it would have to be a person or a family child care home to take care of my child”.

These sentiments were particularly true when their children were infant/toddlers, but some had remained outside of center care during the preschool years as well. However, their recollections of what made family home settings valuable to them as parents were also indicative of their views regarding what was important for children observed during their work.

Also worth noting was the assessors provided more examples of negative impressions from their work experiences. Ideas flowed more easily when asked to recall experiences where they felt quality was lacking in some way (such as their responses to the prompt, “Finish this sentence for a day that you leftthinking, “If only that teacher would.....”) Many of the assessors initially had to draw from their own personal reasons/recollections of their family’s choice of child care settings for the examples of positive strategies, but it was fairly easy for them to respond to the examples of what had been missing or inappropriate in their work experiences. While they provided instances of positive teacher practices observed in their work, the conversation flowed much more quickly when they were asked to recall what they felt should have been different in classrooms they visited for NCRLAP. This trend was present in both focus group discussions.

Identified Themes from Focus Groups

Focus group participants’ responses were analyzed and general themes within the responses identified. This section provides a description of the themes that emerged from the analyses. While the comments from the assessors were drawn from many different personal and professional experiences, there were many similarly expressed constructs and themes identified from the conversations. These twenty three themes included some very specific areas as well as some quite broad subjective constructs. Table 3 in the Appendix presents a list of participant comments organized by the theme to which each comment is related. These themes and their frequency of mention in the discussions are noted on Table 4.

Sense of community and responsiveness. Predominant for both groups was the importance of establishing a *Sense of Community* for children and the role this construct held for quality. This particular theme totaled 41 references during the discussions. Participants mentioned the importance of a feeling of ownership for the children, providing physical space that was inviting for both children and adults, a sense of family or community, genuine responsibilities for children, a sense of “being all together”. These were all grouped as *Sense of Community* and were expressed frequently by both focus groups. One assessor described it as “.....sometimes you go into a classroom and you get a sense of community. That the teacher’s doing something [so] that all of those children in the classroom have a dynamic or a sense of belonging...they all have a place and then sometimes you go into classrooms where that’s not there.where there is community there seems to be a lot more learning and a lot more things going on....” Still another described “ (one) classroom will be completely chaotic and (in another)..... classroom the children are free and do what they want when they want but there is cohesiveness.....it just flows.....that sense of community is the idea behind the cohesiveness.....and the flowing verses this chaotic freedom...”

Focus group participants also noted a teacher’s *Responsiveness* to children as a contributor to quality. References to this concept were present a total of 48 times. Participants mentioned the importance of a teacher’s ability to “know her children” and respond to their needs. This idea was also reflected in comments such as “she found what worked”, the teacher’s willingness to “adjust schedules” when needed, a teacher “putting the kids first”, “putting effort into relationships (with the children)” and a

teacher's willingness to "play" with the children. Participants also commented on the teacher's "awareness" of the children, "listening" or "watching" the children to gain understanding. One participant summed up her thoughts in this area as it related to the scheduled day as "...feed them and then if they want to play, let them play or if they want to go for a nap, then let them (nap)."

Additional themes. While the themes *Sense of Community* and *Responsiveness* captured greater quantities of the expressions made by assessors, there were others that were also important to the discussions. A teacher's use of *Language* was mentioned frequently. Participants cited both the "how" and the "what" of language experiences, including comments such as the importance of a teacher's "softness of language" or the ability to be "storytellers" and give children explanations for "why" something mattered. Providing literacy experiences and having the ability to "elicit questions" from the children were frequently viewed as contributing to quality in classrooms.

In addition to having language/literacy available as part of the curriculum, a teacher's ability and willingness to follow the *Interests of Children* in planning was often mentioned. One participant recalled having been in a program where the teacher decided to have naptime outdoors on a particularly nice day based on the children's request. Participants also mentioned the importance of plans that were developed based on children's interests, including using a theme-based curriculum that was based on children's choice of themes. Another participant recalled a teacher's conversation with a child upon arrival regarding the past weekend's activities and then using this conversation for a later activity. Also mentioned was the importance of a child being

able to “experience the things he’s interested in in multiple ways”. “Avoid forcing an activity” and “letting children choose a project” as well as “following the children’s lead” were also phrases with meaning for this category. One example regarding the importance of children’s interest and how it can influence a child’s involvement in learning was related by an assessor as follows:

.....there’s this one teacher in this preschool classroom..... and she did this activity with worms....like a worm container that was full of dirt and worms....books about worms, and magnifying glasses and they were counting the worms andit wasn’t just like “feel the dirt” it was like see who can get three worms in your cup and let’s look at the anatomy of a worm in this book and let’s see if we can find this part on this worm.... the kids were so into it and there were so many opportunities to learn about these worms in so many ways in science and other and it was amazing.

In some cases, the important practices were related to a teacher’s ability to understand children and their development in general. This *Knowledge of DAP* was important to a teacher’s ability to promote engagement of children. One assessor described this knowledge held by teachers as follows:

...the teacher who recognizes that everything these children do is natural to them. It’s appropriate....even when children engage in negative behaviors it’s part of that child. And I love it when teachers can see like an argument going on and rather than be shocked or disappointed and I feel like so often we see that... But rather than they say, ‘Oh I see we have a conflict here and let’s work on working it out and I recognize that it’s a natural part of you guys being in this environmentthat conflicts will arise and our task is to solve them and to give you tools and to recognize even the negative aspects of taking care of children as experiences of learning.

This idea of the importance of a base of knowledge was also reflected in the concept that teachers should recognize the *Capabilities of Children*. One assessor related this idea as follows:

For me it's if I were gonna make one statement to all teachers before I die.....one message.....it's that you can give kids more credit. If you give them the tools they will take care of so much. I think teachers make their jobs harder by never giving children the language or the skills to handle the situations. There's no discussion. It's also like this notion the teachers also don't even realize that the kids could possibly take that overthat the teacher is in 'charge'that the rules are implemented. It never even occurs to her that they can be involved...

A teacher's demonstration of certain personal attributes emerged as themes. These included *Calmness* ("all day long she was like that nothing really upset her"), *Flexibility* ("going with the flow"), and *Nurturing* ("you feel warmth"). How and when a teacher displayed satisfaction and *Enjoyment* of his/her work ("enjoyed the children", "having a good time") and whether or not teachers *Acknowledge Feelings* ("recognized feelings are appropriate and ok") were also considered important.

Further, a teacher's ability to use a *Teachable Moment* ("finding those teaching moments"), to provide an *Integrated Curriculum* ("whole room kind of exploded with the theme"), appropriate *Materials* ("facilitating use of those materials"), and *Music* ("she just would sing to him") were noted as important to assessors. Additionally, teachers who were willing to get on a *Child's Level* ("getting down on the floor") and encourage *Peer Interactions* ("let them learn how to interact with each other") were also viewed as important contributors to quality environments. One assessor emphasized the importance

of teachers' use of *Physical Touch* ("pat on the back", "high five", "hugging children") and the importance of offering more than "routine care" touches.

Assessors described the impact of having teachers who were willing to be an *Advocate* ("gonna do right by these kids") for children. One of the more poignant stories shared by a focus group member dealt with an observed inequity toward a child and the importance of being an *Advocate*. This individual recounted seeing a child in one classroom who was having some behavior issues, but who was also frequently being disciplined at times when he was not responsible for the problem. The teachers were quick to assume he was guilty of causing disruptions in the classroom that were not his fault, and he would receive frequent unwarranted reprimands. Threats of "calling his mother" and "taking him to the office" were heard often during the morning observation. After a return to the classroom from the gym, this child asked and received permission from one of the teachers to get water from the hallway water fountain. The second teacher saw him in the hallway and immediately assumed he should not be there. She proceeded to "fuss at him", "point her finger in his face...really angry" and tell him she would get him kicked out of that classroom. The teacher who had granted permission observed this interaction, along with the focus group member, yet never offered that the child had received permission to get water or to intervene on his behalf with her co-worker.

While many of the ideas and constructs described by the assessors were subjective, there were also ideas that were fairly specific. One example was an assessor's recognition of the importance of *Room Arrangement*. She described: "... it's almost so

basic...but I wanted to go, 'alright everybody stop.....we're gonna move this shelf here and this shelf here and put the book center over here and everything will be so much better.'”

Similar reactions to the typically observed *Groupings* of children and transitions were mentioned:

I think that's my number one thing....one big one that's everyday is when there are two teachers and twenty kids. ...why do all of you have to go into lunch at the same time? And then they stand and (are) waiting for the ten kids who aren't done picking up their toys. Why don't you just take the ten and wash and then the ten who are done....there's two teachers, divide them up.

There were only three themes out of the twenty-three identified that did not appear in both discussions. The importance of *Physical Touch* and *Music* were only mentioned in the larger focus group, and the idea of a teacher's *Natural Ability* only appeared in the smaller group.

Dimensions of Quality

Overall, the twenty three themes appear to group into broader categories relating to differing dimensions of quality: Process of Teaching, Knowledge Base, and Plan for Teaching. This rather loosely fits with our current understandings of “process” and “structural quality”. Constructs within the “Plan for Teaching” Dimension represent more easily quantifiable and somewhat less subjective constructs such as those typically represented in structural quality. The Process of Teaching dimension included those constructs with greater subjectivity and more often difficult to quantify. The Knowledge Base Dimension is representative of the role that we know education plays in creating

quality learning environments and represents the application of basic principles of developmentally appropriate practice. The Dimensions and their related themes are detailed on Table 5 in the Appendix.

Process of teaching. One dimension (Process of Teaching) captures those themes which are most closely related to a teacher's personal characteristics and "how" she/he teaches. The manner in which a teacher responds to the children in his/her classroom (*Responsiveness*) and the ability to create a sense of cohesiveness and belonging for children (*Sense of Community*) are central to one dimension related to more "process-oriented" interactions. Included in this dimension are themes related to a teacher's personal characteristics such as *Calmness*, *Enjoyment* of his/her work, and *Flexibility*. Themes from the discussions that were associated with a teacher's ability to display caring and warmth fell within this dimension as well, such as *Nurturing* and *Physical Touch*. Some assessors mentioned those teachers who "just get it" or have what appeared to be innate abilities to relate to children. These comments reflecting the theme of *Natural Ability* also fall within this dimension.

Knowledge base. A second dimension (Knowledge Base) incorporates the knowledge necessary to provide quality learning environments for young children. A teacher's ability to understand how to teach young children in general was described through several of the themes. The themes identified from the discussions that fall into this area would include *Knowledge of DAP* and recognition/utilization of a *Teachable Moment*. The *Language* used by teachers also falls into this dimension. While the comments made by assessors regarding language could conceivably cover multiple

dimensions, most of the ideas from the discussions relating to this theme were based on a teacher's ability to understand children's development and provide appropriate expansion of their ideas through questions, comments and literacy experiences. Finally, included in this dimension is the theme of *Advocate*. The comments attributed to this area included a focus on professionalism and doing what's right for children. One assessor described the teacher who "recognizes that she is a professional and an expert in the field...who is there to know what is right even in the face of...adversity".

Plan for Teaching. A third dimension (Plan for Teaching) addressed a teacher's planning of the curriculum and the environment, and especially how activities related to the interests of a specific group of children. The method by which transitions during the day were organized and implemented, as well as how children were grouped, the encouragement of peer learning and relationships, and how staff resources were utilized all fell into this dimension. Included in this dimension are the themes of *Grouping, Integrated Curriculum, Interests of Children, Materials, Music, Peers, and Room Arrangement*.

Additional dimension. Finally, each group mentioned the importance of *Program Support* for teachers. This concept (Program) was the fourth dimension. Provision of professional development and supports to allow teachers to enjoy their work and be successful were mentioned in both focus groups and viewed as important. While this was outside of the individual teacher's realm of control, this support was described as influencing the abilities of teachers to provide quality environments for children. One assessor related an observation with a teacher she described as "okay with the kids, not

excessively nurturing and warm, but appropriate”. During the interview conducted after the classroom observation, the teacher related she “really just can’t stand working at this place because they don’t provide materials....they don’t get time off to work on their lesson plans....she’s required to take two hour lunch breaks”. This assessor related that she “got the sense that (this teacher) probably could thrive somewhere if she had a better support system.”

While the two focus groups were quite different in many ways, the comments and ideas shared in both represented similar concepts and priorities regarding important components of quality classrooms. The overlapping themes and similar experiences from across the state gave credibility to the information derived from these discussions.

Alignment with Current Literature

Identifying What Matters

As part of the process to determine the important constructs, practices, ideas, and strategies that are viewed as elements of high quality, engaging environments for young children, several sources were compared and reviewed for congruent themes. The purpose of this review to compare descriptions of high quality learning environments was to provide confirmation that the themes identified by the focus groups were shared by other early childhood professionals and were representative of “best practices”. The themes of the focus group discussions, a state-wide publication of preschool early learning standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004), standards advocated by NAEYC’s accreditation process and guidelines for practice (NAEYC, 2005; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), a longitudinal study detailing characteristics of

effective teachers (Walker, 2008), and the items on the preliminary tool described earlier were compared.

The results from this comparison are indicated in Table 6 in the Appendix. While all of the sources provided varying perspectives on essential practices, there were many areas of overlap and alignment within the elements of essential components for young children's learning described within these sources. For instance, all sources provided suggestions that included the teacher's personal attributes as teachers, or "how" teachers teach.

One of the most frequently mentioned attributes from the focus group discussions, creating a *Sense of Community*, is reflected in Walker's characteristic of "cultivating a sense of belonging" (#7). Focus group members mentioned the importance of feeling welcomed in teacher's classrooms, of having teachers who made children feel like they were important, feeling like "family", and having a sense of belonging with everyone having a "place". While this is one of the more subjective constructs from the focus group discussions, it was also one of the most frequently mentioned in its importance to quality classrooms for young children. In addition, the NAEYC's examples for teachers of developmentally appropriate practice stipulate the importance of creating a "sense of the group as a cohesive community" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In addition, the first NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard for Accreditation advocates the promotion of "belonging as part of a community" (NAEYC, 2005). NC's Early Learning Standards identify the need to create a "warm, inviting classroom atmosphere" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004). It appears that this review of divergent sources

provides some support for the importance of this theme that was identified through the focus groups.

The significance of relationships existing within communities, as well as personal characteristics of teachers that contributed to building relationships was reflected in multiple sources. Focus group members related the importance of “feeling like a family” and offering “inviting places where families like to hang out”. The college students participating in Walker’s study, as well as the national and state-wide process conducted by NAEYC and the authors of NC’s early learning standards reflected the importance of the relationship that the teacher establishes with students. The teacher’s personal characteristics, such as being willing to admit mistakes, have a sense of humor and offer respect, were listed along with his/her ability to offer an organized and creative classroom to encourage learning.

Equally important in the themes derived from focus groups was a teacher’s *Responsiveness* to children in her/his classroom. This construct can be found in the Walker’s characteristic #6 Displaying a Personal Touch, in the NC Early Learning Standards recommendation that teachers “listen and respond...to children” and in the NAEYC DAP examples as “responding attentively”. The *Responsiveness* noted by the focus group themes may also be represented in the concept of connecting with children through “playing” together. The NC Early Learning Standards advise early educators to “demonstrate spontaneity, a sense of wonder, and excitement” which is closely related to common views of “playing”. While a teacher’s Responsiveness extends beyond the concept of “playing together”, when teachers participate with children in a manner that

allows the child to lead the interaction rather than act in response to the adult's direction, the teacher demonstrates *Responsiveness* in his/her behavior.

All sources defined areas that demonstrate preparation and planning by the teacher. The importance of a teacher's ability to create interesting as well as age and individually appropriate activity plans appears strongly in all the documents reviewed. Walker (2008) identified the importance of being Prepared (#1) and Creative (#4). The assessor discussions frequently returned to the importance of reflecting the *Interests of Children* in plans and using appropriate *Groupings*, transitions and *Materials*. Both NAEYC and the NC Early Learning Standards stress providing a range of appropriate materials, listening to and building on children's ideas, and allowing sufficient time for the children to use the materials available.

Walker's students discussed the importance of having teachers who held high expectations of them (#3) and assessors related the importance of teachers who value the *Capabilities* of their children and involve them in meaningful responsibilities. The idea used by Walker for this characteristic of "challenging students to do their best" can also be found in the NAEYC's advocated practice of scaffolding learning for children, and NC Standards strategy for educators to "provide challenging, high-quality tools and equipment", as well as the Widely Held Expectation that children will begin to "demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges (p. 18).

Focus group members frequently mentioned the importance of teachers conveying an *Enjoyment* of their work, of "being happy to be here", and having a sense of "doing

something important”. Walker’s list captures a similar idea from survey respondents in their mention of the importance of being Positive (#2).

The information from these various sources regarding similar concepts, strategies and practices all help to affirm the importance of including not only what we teach to young children, but also how we teach. Further, the appearance of these subjective constructs throughout the various sources speaks again to the need to better identify, define, and find ways to measure what is designated as important by many the early childhood field.

Classroom Observations

Description of Classroom Observation Contexts

Many of the important attributes associated with quality were found in the classrooms observed, even though some important components were at less than desired levels. In all of the classrooms observed, I found children seemed to be at ease and familiar with the classroom routines and teachers. There were no instances of extreme behavior problems exhibited by children. In addition, children and teachers displayed evidence of positive relationships. None of the teachers used demeaning or overly critical language with children, and all of them seemed to care about the children in their classrooms. I found many instances of positive and warm interactions and no examples of overly harsh discipline.

Observations Related to Dimensions of High Quality Learning Environments

My intent in conducting classroom observations was to collect descriptions and examples of behavior for each of the themes identified in earlier parts of the study. I was

particularly interested in those components recognized by multiple sources as being important for high quality learning environments. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, my observations did not provide substantial examples or a variety of implementation techniques and strategies related to these constructs, even though they were present in the focus group discussions, and the review of the literature. However, the examples I found were worth noting.

The observations related to the identified themes are noted below and grouped according to their corresponding Dimension of “Process of Teaching”, “Plan for Teaching”, or “Knowledge Base”. Since the fourth Dimension of “Program” related to supports offered by the employer was not an observable area and would have called for an interview, I did not include it in these findings. However, this does not reflect the belief that this area is of less importance than the areas described.

Observations Related to Process of Teaching Dimension

Sense of community. Establishing a sense of community or “family feeling” is frequently used as an indicator of quality environments. This was a very strong theme in the focus group discussions, is central to the most recent examples given for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), and is reflected in the list of strategies for early educators in North Carolina’s Early Learning Standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004). In classroom observations, activities related to group efforts, such as a “Plan for Peace” where each child shared their individual contributions, helped focus on the sense of being part of a “group”. In addition, one observation of a large group gathering where children were involved in

singing familiar songs reflected a shared and enjoyed experience. Those advocating use of the Responsive Classroom Approach also incorporate use of a “group meeting” as one strategy for building a sense of cohesiveness for children (Elliot, 1995).

The “plan for peace” activity I observed in one classroom was planned by the teachers as a strategy to address hurtful behaviors exhibited by the children. This was in place in one of the classrooms that I visited on two separate days. This strategy was not in place on the first day and the teacher’s primary intent seemed to be decreasing the hurtful behaviors. In comparison, the large group gathering I observed in another program where children seemed to be experiencing a sense of community during the singing activity, was a regular event and obviously enjoyed by the children. While both were effective strategies, the regularly planned event seemed to produce a greater degree of cohesiveness for the children based on my observations.

In attempting to find ideas and examples of additional strategies that helped build the construct of community in classrooms, I looked for various ways that a child’s home environment might be present in the classroom. What I most often found was a list of their names on a bulletin board and pictures of a few children with their families in one classroom. I had anticipated finding evidence of pets, family members, various occupations held by family members, houses and where children lived, what their rooms looked like, etc. While many sources indicate the importance of reflecting children’s families and home culture in the classroom, I found very little evidence of use of this practice during my observations.

The idea of “ownership” is also related to this construct and I looked for strategies that promoted children’s ownership of their space. This concept was related to the idea that we are most comfortable in and feel free to adjust, rearrange, and use the materials and furnishings in our own homes. This sense of ownership allows children the opportunity to truly explore the various areas and materials offered in a classroom. Again, I saw very few behaviors that indicated children felt ownership of their classrooms. In most classrooms, the ownership seemed to be held by the teacher, even though children were comfortable in the space. Teachers were sometimes heard using words that should help encourage joint ownership such as “we” and “our”. However these were typically only in reference to care of materials or supplies. In one classroom, a child selected the “quiet area” and voiced her need to be alone for a while. She proceeded to arrange the large pillows in this area as she wanted them, spending between 5 and 10 minutes getting them “just right”. When the teacher came by and saw that the pillows had been moved from their original positions, she assisted the child in “fixing” the pillows as they were “supposed” to be. The teacher was not harsh with the child or displaying anger at what she had done, but it was clear that the ownership of that space was held by the teacher, not the child.

Permission to use materials that were easily accessible to the children was often sought from the teacher, as well. This happened even though there were no apparent barriers to use of the materials by the children. Materials were within children’s reach and no comments indicating they were not to be used were heard, yet children did not readily take materials off of shelves without seeking permission.

Given the importance of creating a sense of community and having children feel free to explore using various materials and media that is present in our current literature, the absence of evidence of these constructs during my observations was concerning.

Responsiveness. One of the key elements to a teacher's responsiveness is the degree to which he or she connects with children. The display of a Personal Touch reflected in the characteristics of effective teachers that Walker (2008) identified, the "spontaneity, sense of wonder and excitement" advocated for early educators (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004), the "genuine...verbal encouragement" listed as an example of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) all direct teachers toward interactions that help children become more engaged in the classroom and in learning.

Building connections with children was observed through child-led or initiated activities. As mentioned earlier, I observed many positive interactions during the activities provided (adults talking with children, asking questions, giving information). However, interaction most often originated with the adult. While positive interactions between children and adults helped children attend, it was when adults relinquished the role of leading the activity to the child(ren) that I observed evidence of excitement coming from children. During instances of positive interactions, there would still be times where children looked around the room as if to see if something appeared more interesting than what they were currently doing. Their attending would sometimes ebb away, even if it returned. Whereas, when children led the activity, as in role playing with adults in dramatic play, they remained consistently focused on the activity for a longer

period of time. This relinquishing of leadership in the interaction was observed to lead to a deeper level of engagement and greater enthusiasm for the activity at hand.

There were few instances where the interactions were led by the children rather than directed by the adults. As with observations concerning interactions, the conversations where teachers “listened to” children were frequently still controlled by the adults. Teachers were most often observed “listening” when children were responding to a question posed by the teacher and there was an expectation of the response. The exception to this was when children were observed seeking assistance from their teachers. This was observed occasionally when children needed assistance with clothing, or wanted to use materials that were not readily available. Overall, there was a greater amount of time when teachers were observed talking to, rather than listening to, children. When I did observe spontaneous conversations that were initiated by children, they were most frequently occurring during snack times when teachers and children were sitting together.

Finally, perhaps one of the most important opportunities for teachers to display responsiveness comes when there is a need to adapt their classroom routines according to the immediate needs of the children. Modification of the schedule was observed for a child (with special needs) in one classroom. A large group activity was lasting beyond his ability to attend and one of the adults went with him to get materials for an activity area. During another observation, I saw of an extension of activity time based on the teacher’s awareness that “she hated to interrupt them, they were playing so well”. Her awareness of the children’s engagement and recognition that many children had not yet

arrived for the morning helped her decide to delay large group time. On another occasion, a teacher was heard referencing a need for ending free play and she transitioned into outdoor play as a response to this need. While not shortening or lengthening of activity times, on one occasion I observed a teacher incorporate an unplanned “stretching” gross motor activity in between two large group activities. When modification was needed, it was very important to the overall experience of the children. Teachers who recognized this need and acted accordingly were observed providing greater opportunities for children’s engagement in the classroom activities. I found that *Responsiveness* was usually present in these classrooms when teachers recognized needs in the children. I also found that most teachers did not often relinquish the role of leading activities so that they could truly “respond” to children’s initiated play.

Physical touch. Members of one focus group discussion had indicated the importance of a teacher’s physical touch for children. During time in the classrooms, I observed several instances of teachers giving a pat on the head, or stroking the hair of a child near them. Most often, this practice was observed when children were upset and in need of comfort from the teacher. Children who had difficulties transitioning into the classroom were often hugged. In one classroom, I saw a child who had been sent away from an activity area due to his behavior. He became upset and sat by himself away from the rest of the children. After a few minutes, the teacher went to him and he sat on her lap while she rubbed his back and discussed the earlier incident. At another classroom, a child who arrived late was welcomed with a hug from the teacher.

Enjoyment. A teacher's enjoyment of his/her work was often mentioned by assessors in focus groups and in the current literature. Use of gentle humor, smiles, laughter with children can all be indicators of a teacher's satisfaction level with work. Smiles and laughter between adults and children were present in all of the classrooms I observed. Humor was observed on several occasions and frequently had to do with a teacher trying to "trick" the children during an activity (questions for the children followed by a "can't trick you!" comment). Self-effacing humor by the teacher (following a slip of the tongue or incorrect statement) was also observed. One teacher joked with the children who wanted to go on vacation the next day with her that she would "need a bigger car if she was going to take everyone". When this was present, it helped create a more relaxed atmosphere, brought on more conversation and laughter from the children, and during activities helped focus children's attention. One teacher's large group activity was around the concept of "pairs of items" and she produced several examples related to this idea which she pulled from a large bag (two apples, two shoes, etc.). At the end of her activity she pulled a very large "pair" of men's boxer shorts from the bag, creating much laughter from the children and also focused attention on the discussion of why we would call this garment a "pair".

Acknowledge feelings. Sensitive caring teachers were recalled as important by students in Walker's (2008) study, the importance of acknowledging children's feelings and emotions were recounted by the NCRLAP assessors, and use of genuine care and affection are often encouraged (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2004; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Evidence for this item found during observations included

comments such as “you look so pleased” (about an accomplishment), “mom left quickly and it made you sad”. Teachers would sometimes comment to other children about a child’s current feelings, “she wants to be by herself now”, or question a child about “how did that make you feel?” By far most comments related to this item were heard during conflicts between children or times when children were upset. When feelings were acknowledged during times when children were upset, it was observed to assist the child to become more involved in the classroom and to reduce their negative reactions. Positive feelings and emotions were less often validated or commented upon, but had a similar impact when observed. The child who received a comment regarding his apparent pleasure at progress on completing an activity smiled broadly and resumed his task.

For this Dimension, there were other themes from the focus group discussions that were related to these observed concepts and possibly captured in some of the areas outlined above. Focus groups discussed the importance of teachers getting on a *Child’s Level*, displaying *Calmness*, *Flexibility* and *Nurturing* behaviors toward children. In my observations, many of these qualities were reflected in teacher’s personal characteristics, as well as their interactions.

While these observations related to the areas of the Process of Teaching Dimension and contributed to children’s engagement, there were also contributions from more indirect strategies related to a teacher’s planning and structuring of the classroom environment.

Observations Related to Plan for Teaching Dimension

Interests of children. Frequently mentioned during the focus group discussions was the importance of a teacher's use of the interests of the children in the classroom when planning the curriculum and implementing activities. In one of the classrooms I observed, the posted activity plans indicated the curriculum was based on children's expressed interest. For each day, there were three or four activities planned and a corresponding anecdotal note used as the basis for the activity. The anecdotal notes were based on various comments by and observations of the children. It should be noted however, that I did not hear comments or expressions by the teachers indicating the reason for the selection of activities. The one exception was a bread making activity that was being done based on a child's family recipe. As the children made bread, the teacher made comments that they were using "Ashley's" mom's recipe. In the remainder of the classrooms, the posted plans were developed based on either teacher or program selected topics. Most of these classrooms used general curriculum themes, such as holidays, letter of the week, "wind", rhyming words, etc.

During the observations, I looked for examples of adaptations to the daily activities, routines, etc. based on interests from the children. Perhaps the strongest observation for adapting the curriculum based on a child's interest came in one classroom where a child commented that his mother was sad because her hair was coming out. The teacher suggested making a card for her and provided the materials. A second child came to assist and the two boys worked for most of the activity period on creating the card. In another classroom, a child asked to use flannel board materials from an earlier group time

activity and these were made available for him. Another observation was made where a child brought bubble blowers from home and the teacher incorporated them into the playground activities for that day.

I also looked for examples of teachers making adaptations based on children's interests during large group activities, as well as center activities. Most large group time activities typically included routine calendar/day of the week, review of choices for center time, pledge of allegiance, etc. While they coordinated with the curriculum theme in most cases, I did not observe any adaptation that I could detect was based on a child's interest. In one classroom, the children were very excited about finding a caterpillar as they arrived. This seemed like an opportunity to use their natural interest and incorporate discussion at group time or during activity time, but this was not done. It should be noted that the children in most cases displayed interest in the classroom activities, however, again the ownership and origination of these activities most often rested with the teachers.

Room arrangement. Effective room arrangement had been one of the themes that emerged in focus group discussions and this was further clarified during the observations. While there were no observed problems with the accepted practices of separating active and quiet play areas, or providing multiple activity centers, there was a wide variation in two areas noted. One was the quantity of space used during the morning activity time. For example, in one classroom the children spent most of the morning observation period in less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the classroom space. While there were no obvious restraints on the children's use of the other parts of the classroom, the entire class transitioned from snack

into the dramatic play and block area. They remained in these two activity areas even though materials such as manipulatives and other toys were on the shelves and appeared available. When a large group art activity was begun by the teacher, they moved as a group to the tables in the remaining part of the room. In contrast, in another classroom, children moved freely among the various activity areas provided and utilized the majority of the space available for most of the observation.

In addition to the amount of space used by the children during observations, there was also variety in the amount of space available for different activities. Some classrooms had fairly equitable amounts of space for dramatic, block, or music activities as compared to less active types of play. Others had the majority of space dedicated to table-type activities such as art, manipulatives, puzzle play, etc. In one classroom, children literally had to turn sideways to pass each other in the dramatic play area.

During the observations, it was noted that where equitable quantities of space for varied types of activities was provided and environments were created where children actually used most of the space, children seemed more engaged in the classroom activities. There was also a difference noted in the children's sense of ownership of the classroom. In more equitably arranged and used classrooms, children were more often observed taking initiative in use of materials. In those with less space available for more active play or where children were seen using less of the available space, children were more often observed asking permission from the teacher to use materials or waiting for instructions to begin play. In one observation, a child choosing to go to the block area waited to see what they were "supposed to do that day" before beginning play. This

happened in spite of the fact that the teacher had not specifically limited their play, even though she gave “ideas” to coordinate with the day’s curriculum theme. It also occurred even though other children later felt comfortable creating different structures than the suggestion of the day.

Peers. In the classrooms observed, children were engaged in frequent conversations with their peers. There were few times when they were not allowed to converse and these were to avoid interruptions for the activity such as large group time. In trying to determine when children were “encouraged to talk”, as opposed to “allowed” to talk, encouragement was most often observed during times of conflict between children. Children were told to “tell her how you feel” when they became upset with a peer. In one instance, a missed opportunity to encourage children’s communication with peers was observed. Rather than facilitating conversation between children, a teacher was observed talking to one child for another child: “Ben would like to come to dramatic play, too”. While her assistance allowed Ben the opportunity to play with peers, it decreased his opportunity to learn more about communicating through words with his peers.

Grouping. Assessors frequently mentioned during focus groups that in quality programs teachers had plans for children that avoided extended waiting times. In the classrooms observed, most had plans and routines that limited the time children were all doing the same thing at the same time. While snack/meal times were typically conducted for everyone, at one center small groups of children were called to snack while others continued in activity centers. Children were divided into snack groups and a call went

out for “snack group #1” to come and eat. When this group finished, “snack group #2” was called and so forth.

Many different types of transition strategies were noted to help avoid wait, and to also provide for smoother transitions when changes in the classroom were needed. Among the strategies used to signal change were the use of a melodic chime to signal transition time, classroom lights blinked, and calls for pre-determined groups of children (e.g., table 1, table 2, etc.). In addition, there were a variety of strategies used to assist children in entering into large group gatherings, such as use of carpet squares to sit on for group, names taped on the floor indicating individual seats for group and a group time gathering song. Exiting strategies that allowed children to transition out of the large group included children leaving based on first letter of their name, or asking for a response/contribution for the discussion prior to leaving. A range of strategies were also observed where the purpose seemed to be to help children control their behaviors. These strategies were also observed most frequently during transition times and included use of imaginary “listening hats”, the term “lips zipped”, and instructing children to “catch a bubble” or fill their cheeks with air preventing them from being able to simultaneously talk. In the classrooms I observed, there were a variety of “transition” strategies used and overall, children did not have long waiting times between activities.

For this Dimension, I also observed evidence of some degree of *Integrated Curricula*. Art activities, group time topics, and occasionally materials provided were often seen to have a similar theme. *Materials* were also available and appropriate for the children. The degree to which children actually used the materials did vary, however. I

observed use of *Music* during large group activities. This was almost exclusively singing of songs. Most of time, the teachers were the only ones that could be heard singing and the intent of the activity was primarily as a transition strategy. One exception to this is described later when a chapel service included singing and participation by the children.

Closely related to the Plan for Teaching Dimension, is the Knowledge Base Dimension. This third area represents evidence of a teacher's understanding of general developmentally appropriate concepts for all children and their importance in the classroom.

Observations Related to Knowledge Base Dimension

While the majority of the discussions with assessors regarding the practices of teachers and their impact on quality concerned the plans for individual groups that teachers developed and how they implemented these plans, there were also comments regarding an understanding of children in general. These themes related to an understanding of basic best practice methods and included areas such as a teacher's understanding of her role as a professional and advocate for young children, provision of language and literacy activities, understanding of age-appropriate activities, and the need to recognize that negative behaviors are to be expected.

One additional aspect of this dimension expressed by the assessors related to appreciating the "capabilities of children". During the observations, I watched for how often children were engaged in meaningful responsibilities in the classroom, how often they were encouraged to fully complete activities or extend the activity, and the degree to which conflict resolution rested with the children rather than the teacher.

While children were often observed having classroom tasks, (e.g., snack helpers giving out napkins, collect used plates/napkins, assist in returning items to kitchen, etc.), these were usually delegated by the teacher and would not have been viewed as responsibilities. The instances where the work completed by children in the room appeared to be meaningful and called on a higher level of ownership of the responsibilities was typically in response to a mishap (e.g., cleaning up an art spill or getting flour off of the chairs after a bread-making activity). As with other areas I observed, children seemed more often to have “secondary” roles rather “ownership” roles when it came to routine tasks in the classroom.

CHAPTER VI

PRELIMINARY TOOL REVISIONS

The original preliminary tool developed early in the study to guide data collection and provide context for the study collection was used and revised throughout the process. Items on the tool were compared to the themes derived from the discussion groups, aligned with the current literature, and served as the framework for the classroom observations. During the various parts of the study, revisions were made to the tool as they seemed appropriate. Items were added, some items were identified as possibly needing removal, and edits were done to the language used in many items. The revisions to the tool arising from classroom observations were more prevalent early in the observations (after the first two observations, four additional items were added), but ideas and revisions emerged with every observation. The resulting tool with revised items is found on Table 7 in the Appendix.

During observations focusing on peer interactions, the item “Children are allowed to talk to peers” was found to be necessary and added. This came from a sense that the original item, “Children are encouraged to talk with peers”, was inadequate alone. Children were frequently allowed to have conversations with their peers during play, however, “encouragement” for conversation was much less frequently observed. When it was observed, it was most often used during times of conflict resolution. Since the

opportunity to have conversations (as opposed to no opportunity to talk) was viewed as significant to the overall atmosphere in the classroom, this item was included.

Similarly, the item “Classroom rules allow flexibility/are not overly controlling” was deemed necessary. Items indicating the importance of an “orderly classroom” and “boundaries and rules” were part of the preliminary tool, but observations indicated the presence of these two components without some degree of flexibility missed an important contributor to engagement. This was apparent in one observation where children were observed waiting on instructions for how to play with materials and asked permission/approval from the teacher prior to use of activity centers. A greater degree of interest by children was observed when they felt free to use materials independently. While there were no apparent “ask the teacher first” rules, these seemed to be “understood” expectations based on the children’s behaviors.

The third item added “Room arrangement supports use of materials” was influenced both by the importance given to basic room arrangement principles by the focus group participants, as well as observations where, even though a variety of activity centers were provided, the use of these areas was limited by the quantity of space provided for them. The wording was selected due to observations that in many classrooms, the quantity of space allocated for some activities (table toys, primarily) was much greater than other activities (dramatic play, block play, etc.)

The item “Child are hugged or physically touched in a positive manner” was added to reflect the importance noted for this concept from the discussion groups and the literature. During observations, this item was particularly noted when children were

upset or in need of comfort and was a measure of the teacher's response to a particular child's needs.

While these items were recognized early in the observations as needed, there were also some realizations of additional items that would aid an observer that came later in the study. These suggested additions were not included in the majority of the observations, but are suggested as a continuation of revisions that could be of value. These items are also noted on Table 7.

In addition, there were minor revisions to wording used in some items, primarily for clarification of intended meaning and some noted suggestions for future study. Suggestions include considering removal of some items (e.g., "Routine is communicated to children") and incorporating related concepts into one rather than several items. In particular, there are more items than seem necessary related to large group time experiences and transitions. Finally, the idea to explore the use of "percentages of the whole" for measurement in several areas seems worthwhile. Use of percentages allow for some degree of individualization, while still prioritizing the desired strategy or practice. One area where this seemed applicable was amount of time spent in large group activities. The appropriate length of individual group times may vary according to age, children's interest, and even teacher's skill level. However, current best practice recommendations indicate there should be less time spent in large group activities than in free choice center activities. Another area where percentages seemed relevant was the quantity of time teachers spent talking to rather than listening to children. In most of the conversations observed, teachers spent more time talking than listening to children. Most

of the listening was done when children were responding to a question posed by the teacher or requesting assistance. In addition, use of space seemed an applicable area for use of percentages, even if in the comparison of quantity of floor space used for tables as compared to quantity for activity areas. In many classrooms, tables and chairs consumed the majority of the available floor space, leaving very little area for dramatic play, blocks, or other less sedentary activities.

Conclusion

Confirmation of the importance of specific constructs and practices related to children's engagement was offered from this qualitative study, as well as a possible framework for continued study of how to provide measurement of these constructs. Data collected from the experiences of early childhood professionals, a review of national and state level standards, and classroom observations all corroborated the importance of similar constructs and practices leading to quality, engaging learning environments for young children. Central to these constructs were a teacher's ability and understanding of methods to create a community of learners and to be responsive to children in her/his classroom. While recognizing the importance of these constructs, participants in the focus groups related their observations of them to be "few and far between". This experience was reiterated in the classroom observations in the study where examples of the primary areas of interest were limited and few.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION

The question posed initially for this study was “What strategies and practices are used by teachers in preschool classrooms where children are engaged and enjoying learning?” This question was explored based on the understanding that children benefit when they are engaged and interested in learning activities. Discovering methods teachers can use to facilitate engagement and enjoyment of learning seems central to the best interests of children. In addition to identifying the important strategies and practices related to engagement of children is the need to find a way to provide some method of measurement or identifying their presence in classrooms. In this section, the overarching themes that appear to be related to children’s engagement, measurement issues, and implications and recommendations from the study are discussed.

Sense of Community and Responsiveness

In response to the initial question, two predominant themes emerged from the perspectives of assessors working to evaluate classrooms: a teacher’s ability to create a “sense of community” and the degree to which he/she was responsive to meeting the needs of children in his/her classroom. While there were many other important considerations, these two areas were referenced most often and held the most significance for those describing quality settings. It is worth noting again that their perspectives indicated these qualities were often missing from the classrooms they observed in the

course of their work. These two themes were also heavily reflected in publications designed to provide guidance to teachers of young children.

Ownership

One important component of establishing a sense of community that emerged from the discussions and is reflected in the literature relates to a child's "ownership" of their learning. Hyson (2008) identifies the importance of a child's ability to guide their own learning and self-regulate. The assessors mentioned ownership of the classroom by children as an indicator of quality. In the classroom observations, "ownership" of classrooms frequently and clearly rested with the teachers rather than the children. The need to assist teachers in identifying their role in sharing ownership of the physical space and the process of learning with children is an important step in allowing children the opportunities they need to guide their own learning and develop the necessary skills for self-regulation advocated by Hyson and others.

In a similar observation, it seemed that teachers tended to "own" the interactions they had with children. Assessors indicated the importance of *Responsiveness* and included in this concept is a teacher's ability to "play" with children. It is interesting to note, however, that while how a teacher responded to children was considered very important, there were few references to "playing" with children included in the discussions. Similarly, many positive interactions between teachers and children were observed in the classrooms participating in this study, but few examples of "playing", or having a truly child initiated interaction where a teacher was primarily responding to the child's lead. Few examples of teachers following children in their imaginary play

scenarios, or building with blocks while following a child's instructions, or waiting on the child to guide the choice of materials were observed.

Humor

Closely related and contributing to the establishing of a sense of community in the classroom observations was a teacher's ability to display a sense of humor with the children. Indeed, in at least one setting, the teacher's strong ability to create humorous interactions with children seemed to outweigh other missing components often related to facilitation of engagement, such as allowing choice of activity, or child guided activities. During the focus group discussions a teacher's display of enjoyment of his/her work, including smiles and laughter was mentioned. Researchers have also indicated the importance of a teacher's use of humor in the classroom.

Drawing from their observations of an elementary teacher's interactions with his students, Fitzsimmons and McKenzie proposed a "humor as an engagement model" (in Lytle, ed. 2003). From what started as two separate qualitative studies on a fourth grade teacher's classroom management and non-verbal communication skills, the underlying important use of humor became apparent to these researchers. For this particular teacher, class began with use of a demonstration of humor reflecting "The Way I Am", this led to conversations, jokes, "chatting about reality", reflecting "Who I Am" that continued through the day. The authors described this intentional process as providing positive interactions by which to move to the third component of the model "The Way We Are". This third component incorporated respect, empathy and self-disclosure which allowed students and teacher to move to the fourth component of their model, "Mutual Care and

Trust”. At this point of the process, true engagement of the students in the educational process became possible. For this teacher, use of humor was central to the process of creating genuine relationships. This process created an atmosphere that discouraged students from exhibiting behaviors that might damage the student/teacher relationship. It should be noted that the skills used by this teacher related to his specific abilities and style of communication. He was able to find the right fit for the students in his classroom and for this group of fourth graders, the humor used seemed to be appropriate.

A study by Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk & Smith (2006) looked at college students’ perceptions of what was “appropriate” and “inappropriate” use of humor in their classroom settings. This study surveyed 284 undergraduate students and asked them to identify examples of humor they considered appropriate and suitable, as well as examples they would classify as inappropriate or offensive. Humor that was both related and unrelated to the content of the course was seen as appropriate and included strategies such as jokes, stories, use of media or objects. While jokes or humor that was seen as “disparaging students” was the largest category (42%) of the inappropriate humor examples, it is interesting to note that “teasing students” was offered as an appropriate use of humor. One student described the example given as being “humorous and harmless”.

While the concept of appropriate and inappropriate humor applies to all ages, there are obvious differences between humor for fourth graders, college students and preschoolers. A shared understanding of culture between teacher and student may also be helpful in attempting to use humor in the classroom. It is a strategy that can be helpful

when it works, but also has the potential to do damage to relationships. It is of particular importance to have an understanding of the perspective of the students when using humor in a classroom setting.

Physical touch

Also related to the ideas of creating a sense of community and responsiveness of teacher as important elements for classrooms of young children was the idea of how teachers use physical touch. Assessors in the focus groups recognized the importance of teachers displaying “pats on the back” and “hugs” when needed. While there is an understanding of the importance of touch for human development, there has been little investigation of the role physical contact might contribute to learning for young children. Harlowe (1958) established the importance of tactile stimulation in the lives of Rhesus monkeys, illustrating how important physical contact was in providing typical development for these animals. Bowlby and Ainsworth have established the importance of physical contact for infants in the development of attachment and optimal development for humans. Their work revealed the critical role maternal responsiveness plays when an infant signals the need for closeness and contact. How adults respond to these gestures from infants is related to the development of that child’s later abilities. In addition, the quantity and frequency of “tender holding” during the first few weeks can be linked to the amount of crying and distress of babies in later weeks (Bretherton, 1992).

In spite of the understandings of the human need for contact, the fear of sexual abuse or the misinterpretation of touch has at times led to the development of “no touch” policies for programs. The fear that physical touch could be misinterpreted has

sometimes caused programs to dictate avoidance of touch. Policies and procedures have sometimes instructed teachers and staff to avoid any contact, especially with children beyond the age of infancy.

For those who have examined physical contact in a classroom setting, there is evidence that appropriate positive touch may hold benefits for young children's learning. Wheldall, Bevan and Shortall (1986) instructed teachers to use physical contact and touch children while involved in positive interactions with and praise of children. Alternately, they were asked to avoid touch at any other time. For this elementary school setting with five and six year old children, they found an increase in on-task behavior and a decrease in disruptive behaviors of children involved in this study. However, these findings may be confounded by a resulting decrease in the disapproval expressed by participating teachers. Comparisons between baseline measurements of levels of touch and verbal disapprovals showed that while teachers were instructed to use physical contact in positive interactions with children, without instruction, there was also a decrease in their verbal disapprovals during interactions.

Recently, Fleck & Chavajay (2009) examined similarities and differences in physical interactions of preschool children and kindergarteners. Observations of children in their classrooms examined two categories of touch (purposeful, incidental) and various settings within the classrooms (center play, group times). While similar patterns of touch were found in the various settings for both groups, they found much more frequent involvement by preschoolers in purposeful physical contact. Preschoolers experienced

physical contact an average of .95 episodes per minute as compared to .27 episodes per minute for Kindergarteners.

Purposeful touch included affectionate physical contact as well as contact used for behavior control or instruction. Routine care touch and aggressive contact were also viewed as purposeful. This intentional, planned touch included physical contact between peers as well as touch by teachers. The majority of touch for these children was seen as affectionate physical contact and was initiated by the children. Preschoolers experienced affectionate contact with a peer at a rate of .30 episodes per minute and with a teacher at a rate of .20 episodes per minute. Kindergarteners experienced affectionate contact with both peers and teachers at a rate of .04 episodes per minute. The rate of teacher initiated affectionate contact was similar for both groups. The authors of this study suggest that the variance in frequency and type of touch for these two groups of children may reflect differing needs for physical contact. The initiating of both peer and teacher affectionate touch by preschoolers may indicate the importance of including positive, appropriate touch in the learning environments of young children. However, this area is one where particular attention to cultural differences in what is considered “appropriate” would be of great importance. “Appropriate touch” for children with sensory integration difficulties would also vary and need to be viewed from their particular perspective.

Defining or Recognizing

There is much information written for the early childhood field regarding the importance of creating environments for young children that offer a sense of community and respond to their individual needs. It also recognized that a variety of methods exist

for offering these components within a classroom and that these constructs are subjective and therefore difficult to measure. One teacher's use of humor, another's willingness to offer a hug when needed, the sharing of true ownership of a classroom may all together or individually offer increased engagement by children. Creating community or offering responsiveness may utilize many varied strategies. It may be less important that we identify the exact definitions of these constructs than finding mechanisms that allow teachers to recognize the strategies that promote these attributes in their classrooms. Recognizing these as important components that should be present, even if we do not always agree on the specific definitions may help promote both the level of their presence, as well as move us toward a consensus definition.

Measurement Questions

It is recognized that what we value and say is important is not always easily measured. The primary constructs identified through the various parts of this study are subjective, hard to define and hard to identify. While few examples of strategies aimed at creating a *Sense of Community* and other constructs were identified during the classroom observations, it should be noted that it is hard to determine if this low incidence is related to the absence of these constructs, or limitations in our methods for measuring them. There is evidence to support both. Assessors indicated they rarely observed what they described as important. For the current study, one observation provided evidence that engagement of children and a sense of community were present, but few of the items on the preliminary tool were observed, particularly those related to the Plan for Teaching Dimension. This observation provided an example of a setting where there were

indicators that the children were engaged, but many elements of what we typically consider as high quality programming were absent.

In this particular program, children were observed to be excited about the activities offered in the classroom, participated in both large group and individual activities, and appeared to very much enjoy their experiences in the program. Most of the indicators described by Hyson (2008) for enthusiasm and engagement of children were present. However, there was very little choice offered in this classroom, space was primarily allocated to tables where children sat in assigned seating for specific “work” activities, and most activities were selected based on ideas from the teacher rather than the children. In addition, much of the children’s time was spent in large group activities, rather than free choice.

The items on the tool that *were* observed reflected a high level of “enjoyment” from the teacher. There were many smiles and laughter was present between the adults and children in the room, as well as frequent use of gentle humor. Children’s participation and enthusiasm in singing during a large group chapel program was also an indication that this was an engaging part of their experience. In this classroom, the process of teaching and personal characteristics of the teacher provided engagement, even though many components identified as important were missing.

In this particular setting, some recognized components of quality discussed in this study seemed to have a greater impact than others for the children’s experience. In another setting with different children, or with another teacher, this observation might have been

quite different. It is important to not only find which practices, strategies, and methods matter for most children, but also when and where practices matter for specific children.

Implications and Recommendations

Measurement, Assessment or a Different Focus?

In the classroom described earlier and in others, it may be in the attempt to create a “one size fits all” measurement instrument that we reduce our accuracy of truly understanding the experiences of children. In the early childhood field, we value individual instruction for children. In fact, individual appropriateness is one of the tenets of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, along with age appropriateness and culturally appropriateness (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Just as DAP looks first at a broader age appropriateness of practices and then uses more specific individually and culturally appropriate screens, perhaps an instrument that recognizes basic “best practices”, while still allowing flexibility in the manner in which other important but less easily standardized constructs are measured would have value and offer some components of both measurement as well as assessment.

We advocate for measures of young children’s developmental progress that reflect the individual variances known to occur during the early years. Perhaps there is also a need to find a way to reflect a teacher’s success in responding to the needs of individual children in classrooms. Building a measure of responsiveness to a particular group’s needs would capture one of the recognized components of quality settings often missing in our current measures. It would also allow us to provide more individualization to the process of measuring classroom quality.

Just as particular components of quality may have greater import for certain groups of children than for others, it is worthwhile to consider the importance and use of varying methods of measurement for a desired outcome. Measurement of one point in time can be of value in providing information for some areas of quality, typically those most easily measured and quantified. This system necessarily relies on agreement of definitions of constructs in order to offer comparisons between points in time measurements. However, if assessment of growth over time is the desired result, a system of assessment may be of greater value. This system can provide greater input when the focus is on increasing levels of the presence of strategies and practices for individual teachers. It is also helpful when a broader construct may be built from a wide variety of smaller components, such as evidenced by “sense of community” being represented by teacher’s sense of humor or physical touch. Assessment can also be of greater value when there is a need for individualized plans for improvement for teachers.

It is also worth considering whether resources and time should be spent creating measurement systems, instruments and collecting data or if these resources would be better used focusing on professional development of teachers. In an atmosphere of accountability, have we used our talents and resources to provide measures that offer avenues for increasing the abilities and skills of teachers, or just finding out what we need to improve? Do we need to focus on finding ways to assist teachers in assessing their own levels of competence and performance rather than providing “objective” feedback? If we agree with constructivists that learning is best accomplished through allowing

individuals to create their own learning, perhaps it is worth considering ways to involve the intended recipients.

Linear, Non-linear, or a Combination?

Those suggesting that chaos theory holds value as a lens through which to view learning within classrooms have indicated the value of having some degree of “instability” within a stable system and of encouraging a less linear view of learning (Davis, Smith, & Leflore, 2008). This view is reflected in the current understandings of our physiological processes for learning, as well. Perhaps there is value for measuring the learning within a larger system in a similar manner. Rather than seeing value only in a goal of agreement on definitions and standards used for measurement, it may be worthwhile to seek a degree of chaos and instability. Agreement and generalized standards offers a cleaner and neater picture. However, the view through a chaos theory lens would suggest that those more chaotic “fringe” areas provide the necessary conditions for true learning. The early childhood field has recognized the importance of more subjective constructs such as “community” and “responsiveness”, yet these are not prominent in our instruments offered for measurement, feedback and improvement. Including them to a greater extent may be difficult but worthwhile.

Implications for Teacher Education

As indicated earlier, finding mechanisms to assist teachers in recognizing and including practices that will increase the more subjective constructs identified in this study holds value. As teachers see equal value in “how” they teach as well as “what” they teach, the likelihood should increase that they will include concepts such as

“community”. It is also important to include these concepts in teacher education and preparation. As we are assisting future teachers in gaining skills to plan appropriate educational activities, adapt lesson plans for special needs of children, and use effective guidance strategies, it is also important to offer information on these more subjective areas related to how they teach. At least through discussions that acknowledge the importance of finding ways to engage children, not just “instruct” children we may be able to assist future teachers in beginning to recognize these constructs in their own classrooms. Future teachers of young children may develop skills simply through the recognition of the importance of engaging children and the associated strategies that facilitate this phenomenon.

There is much more that we do not know about measuring the subjective constructs identified in this study than we do know. They are often included in existing measures, but at a minimal level. What we find much agreement about is that they are important, and based on this agreement should warrant greater focus and more research to assist with incorporating them into feasible measurement tools. As we attempt to refine and clarify what is needed in young children’s educational settings, it is important to keep in mind the words of many early childhood advocates....children can be “eager to learn”, “enthusiastic and engaged”, and teachers can and should provide “opportunities for learning” (National Research Council, 2001; Hyson, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2007).

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

This study provided an opportunity to gain understanding about important teacher practices that contribute to enhanced learning opportunities for young children. Through varying sources and voices, constructs that are important to this process were confirmed and validated. Evidence that “how” teachers teach is equally important as “what” they teach was obtained through focus group discussions, review of current literature, and classroom observations. Of particular significance were practices associated with creating a sense of community and offering responsiveness to children.

Use of a preliminary tool developed for the study, and revised throughout the process, provided a framework for reviewing these and other important concepts identified as contributors to children’s engagement and learning. While the importance of these concepts was confirmed by the study, classroom observations provided few specific examples of practices supporting these areas. Implications for future considerations related to measurement and teacher education were drawn from this disconnect of what we say matters and the methods we use for measurement.

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APPENDIX A. TABLES

Table 1. Original Preliminary Tool of Practices & Strategies
Practice/Strategy
Children called by name
Adults have conversations with individual children
Adults listen to children
Children are encouraged to talk with peers
Children's ideas incorporated into activities/planning
Activities adapted to reflect children's current interest
Indications of learning/understanding by children ("a-ha moments") acknowledged
Excitement/interest of children acknowledged when present
Children's interest in topic is expanded upon
Choice of activities for children allowed
Multiple activities available concurrently
Varied types of activities available
Extension of activities available over time
Large group times limited in quantity
Length of large group times limited
Group time presentations interesting/engaging
Children are actively involved in group time activities
Children's interests and ideas are incorporated into activities
Group time activities adapted to reflect children's current interests
Established routine for classroom present
Routine is communicated to children
Balance of active/quiet play opportunities provided
Orderly learning environment provided
Classroom rules/boundaries are present

Classroom rules have identified consequences
Classroom rules are enforced consistently
Notice given prior to transitions in classroom routine
Transition strategies used
Children's interests incorporated into transition strategies
Quantity of transitions minimized
Schedule modified by shortening time for activities when needed
Schedule modified by lengthening time for activities when needed
Schedule modified for individual children when needed
Completion of activities allowed for children
Children encouraged to complete activities
Interruptions of children's play minimized
Sense of community provided for children
Children have meaningful responsibilities in classroom
Children's home environment reflected in classroom
"Ownership" of classroom by children encouraged
Singing with children in group time present
Singing with children informally present
Intentional use of music as an activity
Adults participate in play activities with small groups of children
Adults participate in play activities with individual children
Gentle humor used with children
Smiles, laughter, positive affect present
Validation of feelings/emotions of children present
Objective, constructive, non-judgmental statements used in conversations with children

Table 2. Questions used in interviews with NC Rated License Assessors.
(Progression from very broad to more specific areas.)

In thinking about the highest quality preschool classrooms you have visited, please describe the strategies used by teachers that come to mind. (What did you see on a day that you left thinking “this is a good place for children”?)

Please describe any teacher interactions or methods that you have observed that you consider to have been very impressive, memorable, and important to the classroom operations. (What did you see on a day when you left thinking “that teacher rocks!”?)

Please describe a classroom situation where you felt there was something missing that would have made a huge difference for the children if it were present. (Finish this sentence for a day that you left a classroom thinking “If only that teacher would.....”)

We know that waiting for long periods of time is very difficult for young children. What strategies do you remember teachers using that helped avoid “waiting”?

What strategies used by teachers have you observed in classrooms where children appear truly engaged in learning and excited about the activities provided?

Please list the three most important qualities you think are necessary to create environments where children are engaged in learning.

Table 3. Themes, Phrases, and Comments

Table 3. Themes, Phrases, and Comments	
<p><u>Sense of Community</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it feels just like they're all together having this experience -engage in actual tasks -it feels like a house. -feels like a family. -kids have ownership -work together -The kids run the classroom they were like their own individual teachers. -got to do meaningful work -children know you have to keep going until it's clean -children really are responsible -children take care of needed tasks without direction -like being with a family -put a table cloth on the table -flowers on the table -they had a garden. -like family time together. -Ownership by the children -at home there..... -Comfortable -felt at home -home-cooked meals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -each child got a birthday cake on their birthday -presents for all at Christmas-time -whole family thing...all the parents -welcomed us and she welcomed the children - Ownership -sense of community -all have a place -Cohesiveness -sense of community is the idea behind the cohesiveness -sense of belonging. -children are reflected in the room -pictures of the children and their work is posted -had a part in how the room is set up and what they've done with that space. -Space makes the children feel important -inviting where parents want to hang out -teachers say "good morning" -things that parents can do -things that happen on weekends or after hours that parents can be involved in

Responsiveness

- communicate intentions to help
- found what worked and she kept it going
- giving her (child) the time
- knew the children really well
- everything in sync
- way she interacted with him.
- Playing with child
 - It was genuine
 - it wasn't fake.
- she would figure out what someone liked
- flexibility to do whatever she wanted to do with the kids
- knew the children so well and they knew her so well
- Avoid doing the same things year after year
- adjust lunch schedule
- Interaction
- Facilitation
 - call lunch in early and feed them
 - teacher lets her do her own thing
 - watches her (child) figuring out what she's doing
 - teacher let her do her own agenda
- Interactions
 - see what the children do
 - going with their flow and facilitating
- Not just following the curriculum
 - teacher being full of praise
 - book is about me or something that I'm good at
 - makes me see myself

- children approach the teachers
 - put a lot of work into classroom relationships
 - teacher in the beginning was directive and now she's delegating
 - worked through the process with children
 - just played.
 - know what do the children need and how can I meet those needs?
 - listen to what they have to say
- Responsiveness
 - give you tools
 - Avoid long waits and long transitions for the bathroom.
 - Plan for natural routines to meet basic needs
 - Avoid potty on schedule
 - involved with something instead of waiting in a line.
 - she was very aware of what was going on
 - adjusts her style of interaction to meet the children at their level.
 - Responsiveness to children's needs
 - Putting the kids first....
 - knowing what the kids need and how you can provide it.
 - let them play
- children are moving around

<p><u>Language</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teachers who are story tellers -teachers who use a lot of language -build stories like with other experiences -scaffold relationships into their conversations with children. -discussion. -opportunities with language... -ask questions -teachers spend time explaining to kids. -teachers who are story tellers -give them information -teachers explain why -not just a rule....there's a reason. -give "personal messages" -avoid using "no" or don't -have that follow-throughthe story is included...why. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -storyteller. -builds language -Providing children with language tools that they need -expands their language. -Read to him -sat down and had the most wonderful conversation -encourage children to ask questions. -softness of his language -language -promoting literacy -talk to the child -elicit out of that child -how she talks with them. -talking about what they're doing -literacy.
<p><u>Interests of Children</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -knew my daughter liked music on -took a nap outside. -kids wanted to do it. -know children and their interests -developed my plans from children's interests. -teachers following children's interests -if they want to play, let them play . if they want to go for a nap, then let them nap -use ideas she was able to pull out of him -she knew he had done and was interested in and then planned activity -touched on his interest -taught them how to become good learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -appropriate to their developmental level and their interest -extending things they would talk about. -emergent classroom -things are happening because children are expressing interest -teachers take and really expand -children experience the things they are interested in in multiple ways -a theme based on the child's interest -let children choose project -follow the children's lead -avoid forcing an activity. -ask the kids. -recognize the goodness of children playing freely

<p><u>Knowledge of DAP</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teachers eliminate reasons for conflict -You could really see that she had a plan -recognizes that everything these children do is natural to them. -appropriate....even when children engage in negative behaviors it's part of that child. -recognize even the negative aspects of taking care of children as experiences of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Involved in the process (not calmly sweeping the floor) -an expert in the field -teacher who understands learning that children are doing based on the age -uses assessment and planning -conflicts will arise and our task is to solve them
<p><u>Flexibility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -going with the flow -not so strict and not restrictive -Flexibility -flexibility...like going with the flow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the teacher who can change her path -Flexibility -going with the flow. -appropriate reaction to situations than moving on schedule.
<p><u>Acknowledge feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -acknowledged her feelings as being appropriate -recognized feelings are appropriate and ok -gave them tools to use to deal with emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -talk about how they feel. -Names and label feelings -Avoid just talking about feelings in themes of the month
<p><u>Advocate</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -okay to be who you are. -gonna do right by these kids -Avoid only reprimanding, correcting, guiding behavior -effective discipline strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -makes them feel successful....like I can do it -activities for success -acknowledge mistakes or errors -does what is right even in the face of adversity
<p><u>Calmness</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Calmness -the teacher is calm, the children are calm. -calm sense of being -Avoid displaying annoyance of children's behavior -Calmness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -all day long she was like that nothing really upset her -even and calm with the kids. -relaxed and the children were so relaxed -absence of frustration

<p><u>Capabilities of Children</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -let them figure it out -tell them...you are special you are gonna do great -build their self-esteem -teachers who respect the children -give kids more credit -give them the tools to handle conflicts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -give children the language or the skills to handle situations. -realize that kids can be involved -give them credit -recognize children's capabilities. -Understand differences in capabilities of individual children -giving kids lunch transitions (help wiped off the table tops.)
<p><u>Child's Level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -getting down on the floor -they were down on the level of the children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -always down on the level of the kids
<p><u>Enjoyment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -genuinely enjoys being around children -receive pleasure and benefits from being in that environment -children and the teacher are both generating that feeling that everybody can be happy to be there. -sense of doing something important -teacher who recognizes that she is a professional -rapport with the kids...loved the children -a lot of fun -happy teacher -glad to be there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -having a good time -enjoyed the children -was fun. -teach them that school is fun -attitude toward children -likes her job -Look for the positive things -here because "I love you and I love working with you".

<p><u>Grouping</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -divide group for routines -one handling the routine and one handling the activity -don't have transitions just a rotation -never this big group transition -a teacher outside and let them stay in free play -one teacher outside and one teacher inside. -call them over one at a time to get their coat on while the others are playing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -once everybody is done then you can send them outside. - recognizing when whole group gathering is not appropriate -do the activity in two smaller groups -divided the groups up -call small groups over -Avoid having everyone at lunch at the same time -kids that are done just send them to something else. -two teachers, divide the children into groups.
<p><u>Integrated Curriculum</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -a lot of planning - early childhood themes and their whole room kind of exploded with that theme. -in-depth activity -many opportunities to learn about topic -truly integrated curriculum -incorporate learning lessons into your centers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Avoid whole group activity and then it's done..... -avoid teacher directed... -avoid all sit at the table and do one activity. -learning is incorporated into play. -all kinds of things for them to do outside.
<p><u>Materials</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -children had a bicycle and a helmet -multiple items/materials -facilitating use of those materials -children pulling materials off the shelves and using them -adults help them with the materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -facilitate getting things out and playing playing with materials -Lamps -open-end art materials
<p><u>Natural Ability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -just comes naturally to those people. -what they are born to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -just had that knack to just the natural way of being with children - she just got it
<p><u>Music</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sing to him -Clapping -playing instruments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -played the violin -neat to have the music -musical activities singing songs, jumping around, something

<p><u>Nurturing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -warm..... nurturing -tone is consistently positive -building self-esteem -soft look on the face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -still love child even though they are not the best kid right now -warmth.....you feel warmth.... -tone toward children
<p><u>Peers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -having her friends help her feel better. -let peers help figure it out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -let them learn how to interact with each other. -get a friend to help you.
<p><u>Program Support</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -a support system -program set up -supports in place at that work -more than one teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -additional staff bring food -somebody to help -program supports
<p><u>Physical Touch</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -hugging her and kissing her -hugging -more than just routine care touch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -pat on the back -high five -hugging children
<p><u>Room Arrangement</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -room arrangement. -Avoid quiet and active play being side by side 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -soft room with soft natural lighting -basic room arrangement.
<p><u>Teachable Moment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -using teachable moment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -finding those teaching moments

Table 4
Frequency of Themes

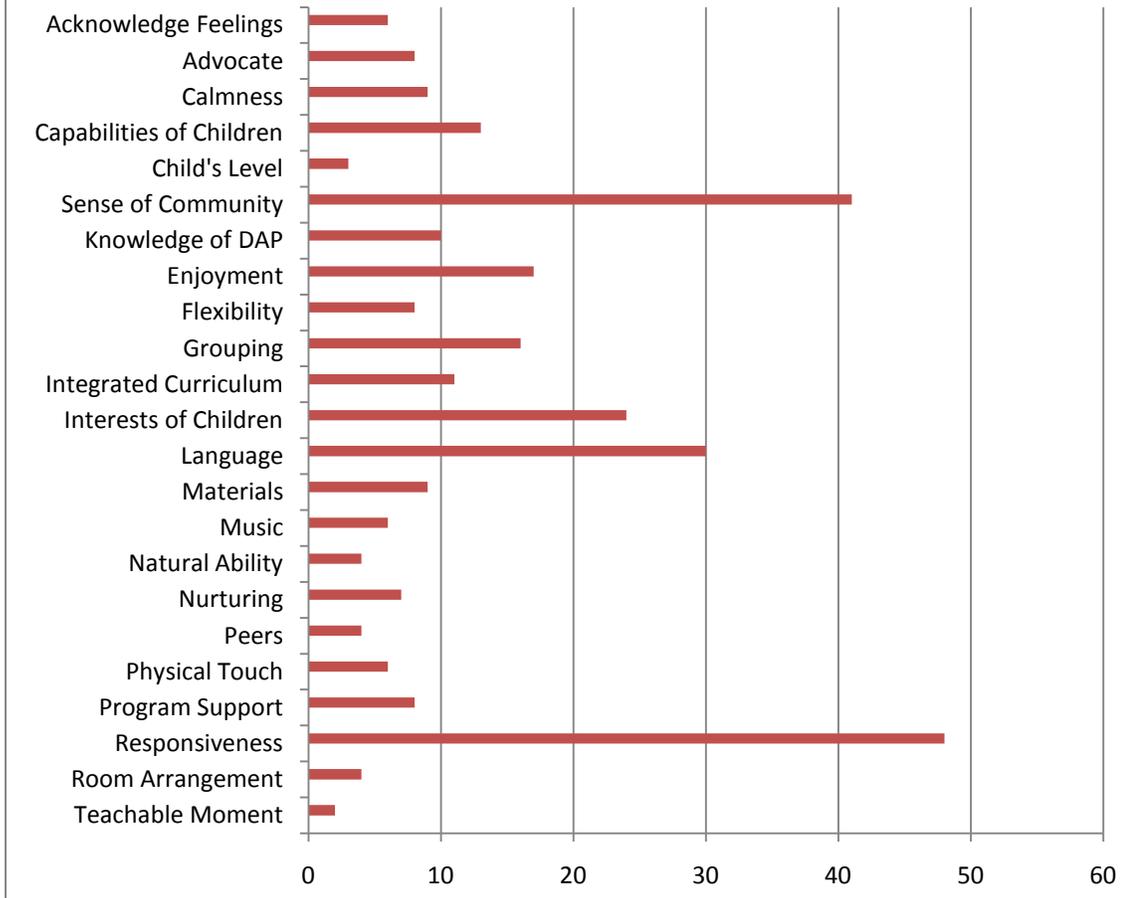


Table 5. Dimensions and Themes	
Dimension	Theme
Process of Teaching	<i>Acknowledge Feelings</i> <i>Calmness</i> <i>Child's Level</i> <i>Sense of Community</i> <i>Enjoyment</i> <i>Flexibility</i> <i>Natural Ability</i> <i>Nurturing</i> <i>Physical Touch</i> <i>Responsiveness</i>
Knowledge Base	<i>Advocate</i> <i>Knowledge of DAP</i> <i>Language</i> <i>Teachable Moment</i> <i>Capabilities of Children</i>
Plan for teaching	<i>Grouping</i> <i>Integrated Curriculum</i> <i>Interests of Children</i> <i>Materials</i> <i>Music</i> <i>Peers</i> <i>Room Arrangement</i>
Program	<i>Program support</i>

Table 6. Alignment of Focus Group Themes, Constructs, & Practices				
Preliminary Tool-Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Children called by name	Sense of Community		# 7 Cultivate Sense of Belonging (welcoming)	"know every child and family well" (p.150)
Adults have conversations with individual children	Language	Listen and respond to exchanges of children's words and thoughts.	#6 Display Personal Touch (approachable, connect with students)	"...talk often and warmly with every child" (p. 156)
Adults listen to children	Responsiveness	Listen and respond to exchanges of children's words and thoughts.	#6 Display Personal Touch (approachable, connect with students)	"...giving children time to express themselves and responding attentively" (p. 156)
Children allowed to talk with peers	Peers	Encourage children to share, listen, and ask questions of one another and compare strategies and solutions.		"provide opportunities for children to play and work together" (p.150)
Children are encouraged to talk with peers	Peers	Encourage children to listen carefully to what others are saying and ask questions.		"actively seek to ensure that all children.....are included in social relationships" (p.150) "refer child to a peer" (p.151) '...many opportunities....to learn to collaborate with others...' (p.155)
Children's ideas incorporated into activities/planning	Interests of Children	Listen to children and build on their individual ideas and concepts		""enable children to deepen and refine their own concepts and understanding" (p. 155) "....plan learning experiences that children find highly interesting...(p. 158)

Preliminary Tool-Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Activities adapted to reflect children's current interest	Interests of Children			"employ a range of strategies...to suit the goal, the child, and the situation" (p.154)
Indications of learning/understanding by children acknowledged	Responsiveness			
Excitement/interest in learning acknowledged when present	Responsiveness	Set an example by sharing children's excitement in discovery and exploration on their level.	#2 Positive (give praise/recognition)	
Children's interest in topic is expanded upon	Interests of Children			" promote ...learning...by scaffolding" (p. 154)
Choice of activities for children allowed	Knowledge of DAP	Offer choices.		
Multiple activities available concurrently	Knowledge of DAP		#4 Creative (resourceful and inventive)	
Varied types of activities available	Materials	Provide children with the means to represent their ideas in more than one medium	#4 Creative (resourceful and inventive)	"support children's exploration and learning of new skills" (p. 152) "engage children...in a variety of learning experiences" (p. 154)
Evidence of extension of activities over time	Responsiveness	Organize the space in a way that protects children who want to work meaningfully for extended periods of time.		

Preliminary Tool-Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Length of large group times limited /Percentage of time spent in large group time limited	Knowledge of DAP	Allow ample amounts of time for activities involving individual choice and shorter periods for large group activities		
Group time presentations by teacher interesting/engaging	Interests of Children		#4 Creative (resourceful and inventive)	"...recognize importance of both child-guided and adult-guided learning experiences" (p. 155)
Children are actively involved in group time activities	Capabilities of Children		#3 Hold high Expectations	
Children's interests and ideas are incorporated into activities	Interests of Children		plan learnin experiences that children find highly interesting...(p. 158)
Group time activities adapted to reflect children's current interests	Interests of Children			
Established routine for classroom present	Grouping	Establish a predictable, yet flexible routine	# 1 Prepared	
Routine is communicated to children				
Balance of active/quiet play opportunities provided	Knowledge of DAP			"periods of alternating active and quiet time" (p.153)

Preliminary Tool-Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Orderly learning environment provided	Grouping		#5 Fair (clear requirements)	
Classroom rules/boundaries are present			#5 Fair (clear requirements) # 1 Prepared	"within safe boundaries..support children's exploration and learning" (p.152)
Classroom rules allow flexibility/are not overly controlling	Flexibility	Be flexible in allowing children to use materials in a creative and integrated way.		
Classroom rules have identified consequences	Advocate		#5 Fair	"...set clear limits....enforce..with explanations" (p. 159)
Classroom rules are enforced consistently	Advocate		#5 Fair	"attend to children consistently" (p. 159)
Room arrangement supports use of materials by children	Room Arrangement	Set up clearly defined interest areas where children can work with a variety of interesting building materials and other items, focus on what they are doing, and have their work protected....	#1 Prepared	"create environment that fosters...initiative, active exploration of materials and sustained engagement...(p.153)
Notice given prior to transitions in classroom routine	Knowledge of DAP	Discuss the sequencing and timing of experiences.		
Transition strategies used	Grouping			
Children's interests incorporated into transition strategies	Interests of Children			

Preliminary Tool- Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Quantity of transitions minimized	Grouping	Structure the day so transitions and distractions are minimized.		
Schedule modified by shortening time for activities <i>when needed</i>	Responsiveness			
Schedule modified by lengthening time for activities <i>when needed</i>	Responsiveness			
Schedule modified for individual children <i>when needed</i>	Responsiveness			
Completion of activities allowed for children	Interests of Children	Allow ample amounts of time for activities involving individual choice and shorter periods for large group activities		"children are able to get deeply involved in an activity.....at a complex level" (p. 153)
Children encouraged to complete activities	Capabilities of Children	Provide children with adequate time to fully explore materials. Demonstrate resilience in face of challenge (p. 18)	# 3 Hold High Expectations (challenged to do their best)	
Interruptions of children's play minimized	Grouping	Allow ample amounts of time for activities involving individual choice and shorter periods for large group activities		"Children have ample time....to investigate what sparks their curiosity" (p. 153)

Preliminary Tool-Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Sense of community provided for children	Sense of Community	Use soft surfaces, light colors, and comfortable furniture to create a warm, inviting classroom atmosphere.	#7 Cultivate Sense of Belonging	"strive to create a sense of the group as a cohesive community" (p.151)
Children have meaningful responsibilities	Capabilities of Children	Establish procedures, routines, and rules to instill responsibility.	#3 Hold High Expectations	
Children's home environment reflected in classroom	Sense of Community		#7 Cultivate Sense of Belonging	"classroom...reflects diversity of community and...involves every child's home culture" (p.152)
"Ownership" of classroom by children encouraged	Sense of Community	Allow children to share ownership of the classroom by participating in discussions related to classroom decisions and helping to establish rules and routines.	# 7 Cultivate Sense of Belonging	
Singing <i>with children</i> in group time present	Music			"engage children in talking....singing...discussing problems or plans" (p.151)
Singing with children informally present	Music			
Intentional use of music as an activity other than group time	Music	Acquaint children with the many different kinds of music and musical instruments		
Adults participate in play activities with small groups of children	Responsiveness	Set an example by demonstrating spontaneity, a sense of wonder, and excitement.	#6 Display Personal Touch (connect with students)	

Preliminary Tool- Revised Items	Focus Group Discussion Themes	Foundations, Strategies for Early Educators, Approaches to Learning	Walker, Twelve Characteristics of an Effective Teacher	Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Ed
Adults participate in play activities with individual children	Responsiveness		#6 Display Personal Touch	
Gentle humor used with children	Enjoyment	Laugh with children and show that you enjoy sharing their sense of humor.	#9 Sense of Humor	
Smiles, laughter, positive affect present	Enjoyment	Laugh with children and show that you enjoy sharing their sense of humor.	# 2 Positive	
Validation of feelings/emotions of children present	Acknowledge Feelings	Show genuine care, affection, and kindness toward children	#8 Compassionate (sensitive/caring)	"...use verbal encouragement in ways that are genuine and related..." (p. 158)
Objective, constructive, non-judgmental statements used in conversations with children	Capabilities of Children		#10 Respect Students	"...work with specific, objective comments" (p. 1158)
Children are hugged or physically touched in a positive manner	Physical Touch			

Table 7. Preliminary Tool -Revised	Practices/Strategies
Children called by name.	
Adults have conversations with individual children	
Adults spend equitable amounts of time listening and talking to children	
Children allowed to talk with peers	
Children are encouraged to talk with peers	
Children's ideas incorporated into activities/planning	
Activities adapted to reflect children's current interest	
Indications of learning/understanding by children acknowledged	
Excitement/interest in learning expressed by children acknowledged when present	
Children's interest in topic is expanded upon	
Choice of activities for children allowed	
Multiple activities available concurrently	
Varied types of activities available and used by children	
Evidence of extension of activities over time	
Percentage of time spent in large group time limited	
Length of large group times limited	
Group time is ended when children stop attending or become disengaged	
Children are actively involved in group time activities	
Children's interests and ideas are incorporated into activities	
Group time activities adapted to reflect children's current interests (omit...redundant)	
Established routine for classroom present	
Routine is communicated to children (omit)	
Balance of active/quiet play opportunities provided	
Orderly learning environment provided	
Classroom rules/boundaries are present	
Classroom rules allow flexibility/are not overly controlling	

Classroom rules have identified consequences
Classroom rules are enforced consistently
Room arrangement supports use of materials by children Children encouraged to use all areas of the room (suggested addition)
Notice given prior to transitions in classroom routine
Transition strategies used
Children's interests incorporated into transition strategies
Quantity of transitions minimized
Schedule modified by shortening time for activities <i>when needed</i>
Schedule modified by lengthening time for activities <i>when needed</i>
Schedule modified for individual children <i>when needed</i>
Completion of activities allowed for children
Children encouraged to complete activities
Interruption of children's play minimized. (omit) Teacher facilitation provided to extend activities (suggested addition)
Sense of community created for classroom.
Children have meaningful responsibilities in classroom
Children's home environment reflected in classroom
"Ownership" of classroom by children encouraged
Singing <i>with children</i> in group time present
Singing <i>with children</i> informally present
Intentional use of music as an activity <i>other than group time</i>
Adults participate in play activities with small groups of children
Adults participate in play activities with individual children
Gentle humor used with children
Smiles, laughter, positive affect present
Validation of feelings/emotions of children present
Objective, constructive, non-judgmental statements used in conversations with children
Children are hugged or physically touched in a positive manner