Head Start Pedagogy in an Era of Accountability

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Abstract. Head Start teachers were interviewed to determine their approaches to teaching in the current early childhood education climate where there is an increased emphasis on academic instruction to meet learning standards. The grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis was used for this study. The core category and basic social psychological process that emerged from the data was "facilitating learning" and was carried out by teachers in four ways: free choice play, incidental teaching opportunities, play-like activities, and direct instruction. The process included three other categories: "choosing a setting," "deciding content," and "addressing other viewpoints" and explains the pedagogical approaches Head Start preschool teachers use to meet increasingly rigorous curriculum requirements and higher expectations for student learning. The findings and their educational implications are discussed.

Keywords: Head Start; preschool; accountability; pedagogy

Introduction

Preschool teachers face a push to increase academic rigor in their classrooms (Brown, 2010). This is a result of both the No Child Left Behind Act's press for greater achievement across all grades and the ongoing shift of curricular content to earlier grades. It has been intensified by the more recent Race to the Top and Common Core Standards initiatives. Frost (2007) warned that we are facing the "perfect storm" in early childhood education with "1) the standardization of education; 2) the dissolution of traditional spontaneous play; and 3) the growing specter of poverty in the United States and around the world." (p. 225). This study seeks to understand the nature of early childhood pedagogy in Head Start classrooms subsequent to the implementation of these education reform initiatives.

Literature Review
Head Start

When looking at the pedagogical approaches used by Head Start teachers, it is important to understand the goals of Head Start preschools. Head Start is a United States government-funded preschool program for children from low-socioeconomic-status families. It was implemented in 1965 to help alleviate social problems associated with people living in poverty and has since evolved to be considered a program that provides school readiness skills to children in the areas of cognitive and social/emotional development (Nemeth, 2011; Office of Head Start, 2010). The Head Start learning framework provided to grantees is comprised of eleven domains. The eight original domains were social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, literacy knowledge and skills, mathematics knowledge and skills, science knowledge and skills, physical development and health, and creative arts expression. In 2011, three domains were added: logic and reasoning, social studies knowledge and skills, and English language development. The latter applies only to students who are dual language learners and who speak a language other than English at home.

Grantees are expected to use the learning framework in developing curriculum and assessments. While the emphasis is on school readiness, the Department of Health and Human Services also requires that Head Start programs use developmentally appropriate activities and that teachers consider the needs of individual students in their classrooms when planning instruction (Office of Head Start, 2010).

Clearly, Head Start preschool teachers face a particularly difficult challenge in the current standards-driven climate because they are responsible for the learning of children who are economically disadvantaged. Their students may come from homes where parents can provide fewer educational resources, and, as a result, the children start preschool with fewer academic skills than those from more advantaged backgrounds. Further, Head Start students are likely to thrive in an educational environment that is initially socially/emotionally-supportive rather than academically-demanding (Ginsburg, 2007). They benefit from time to adapt to the education setting and from positive educational experiences that help them become confident learners who enjoy attending school (Emfinger, 2009; Fantuzzo, Sekino & Cohen, 2004; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Head Start teachers also must be cognizant of the ongoing debate regarding the amount of time children spend in play and playful activities versus teacher-led instruction, and the types of teacher-led instruction that are developmentally appropriate in early childhood (Gewertz, 2010; Graue, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). When learning standards and the movement to increase rigor in the classroom reached the early childhood grades, concerns were raised about how teachers would meet the standards and still maintain methods of instruction that are appropriate for the children they teach.

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction

Developmentally appropriate instruction is an approach to teaching based on professional standards that guide pedagogical practices in early childhood classrooms (Coppel & Bredekamp, 2009). These standards address the importance of research-based pedagogy that meets the individual needs of young children and encourages intellectual growth. There is concern that current early childhood curriculum and materials do not allow for the students to have the open engagement with their environment that is needed for them to develop an interest in learning (Armstrong, 2007). Time for these child-led activities is often reduced when teachers are focused on meeting academic standards and it is the activities chosen by the child that help them develop self-regulation skills as they create and follow their own rules of play (Elias & Berk, 2002). Parents and school administrators, in particular, may not understand the importance of play in developing skills that can lead to later success in school (Graue, 2009). They generally worry about children passing tests rather than having opportunities to learn skills. However, Head Start teachers report understanding that social-emotional development is essential for academic learning (Powell, Diamond, Bojczyk, & Gerde, 2008).

Some research conducted prior to the 1990s provided support for direct instruction in preschool classrooms (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). However, there are few recent studies of direct instruction because the movement for developmentally appropriate instruction in early childhood in the 1990s changed pedagogical practices. Camilli et al. (2010) report that researchers have found that inquiry-based activities where children construct knowledge with the guidance of a teacher result in greater learning than the use of direct instruction where the teacher drills basic concepts until the students remember them. Their meta-analysis also found that children who received instruction individually or in small groups showed greater learning.

This study fills a gap in the existing literature by exploring the pedagogical approaches Head Start preschool teachers use to meet increasingly rigorous curriculum requirements and higher expectations for student learning. This was accomplished through interviews with teachers to determine how they reconcile adherence to developmentally appropriate classroom practices and the need to meet established standards.

Method

The grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis was used for this study. Grounded theory is one of several qualitative research methods that seek to understand the nature of human actions and interactions through nonnumeric organization and interpretation of data (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The purpose of the grounded theory method is construction or extension of theory through exploration and description of data using principles of symbolic

interactionism. This theoretical perspective assumes that people respond to events based on their individual and socially-constructed shared meanings.

Investigators and Participants

The authors are members of a school of education at a large urban campus in the Northeast United States. Our college, and in particular the School of Education, is vitally interested in outreach to the urban community, especially to schools and teachers who provide services to minority and disadvantaged children. Further, recruitment of minority students into our programs has long been a priority.

Recently, an initiative was undertaken by the college to accommodate Head Start teachers who, for the first time, are facing stricter degree requirements to stay in their jobs. These teachers are generally unable to attend college courses scheduled during the day because of their full-time teaching positions, so the college added evening, weekend, and summer sections of courses to enable these teachers to continue working while they pursue a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

The eight teachers interviewed for this study had from four to eighteen years of experience in early childhood education, with an average of about ten years of experience across the group. Five of the teachers reported having a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and four of them had an associate's degree. All of the teachers interviewed were female, were enrolled in the early childhood education program at the college, and worked in local Head Start programs.

Theoretical sensitivity of the investigators has been developed through review of current and historical literature, classroom observations, conversations with early childhood stakeholders, previous research experiences, and our teaching experiences.

Data Collection

For this study, semi-structured interviews lasting about one hour each were conducted to explore how Head Start teachers teach their preschool students. Specifically, we were interested in how they choose pedagogical methods that are developmentally appropriate and would facilitate the type of learning expected by established standards. We started the interview by asking questions such as: Tell us about your classroom. Tell us about the classroom schedule on a typical day. What activities take place in your classroom? Which of those activities do you find the children enjoy most? We then asked follow-up probing questions based on their responses. In addition to the interview, each teacher was asked to complete a questionnaire asking for contact information, the number of years of experience at Head Start, and credentials the teacher has earned.

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. A consent form was signed by each teacher interviewed. It stated that participation in the study was voluntary, the teacher could refuse to answer any interview question, and that participation in the study could be discontinued at any point.

Data Analysis

In the grounded theory approach, data analysis is performed by breaking down and reassembling verbatim data through constant comparison in order to describe a human process. This is accomplished by linking the key concepts present in the data according to the properties and dimensions that exist in discrete categories. This results in a collection of categories which are described through statements of their relationships. The relationships explain who, what, when, where, and how the process would be manifested. The final product is a theoretical whole that explains and predicts how people solve the problem addressed in the study—a grounded theory. The theory is not considered to be a definitive explanation of human behavior, but is instead a modifiable tool available for use in future research.

All the interviews in this study were recorded and then fully transcribed, verbatim. The transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy. During substantive coding a systematic line-by-line review of the full transcriptions was conducted using constant comparison to assign codes, develop conceptual categories, and identify a core variable. Substantive coding was followed by theoretical coding using coding families to relate substantive codes to each other in terms of their properties and dimensions – including strategies used by teachers, types of instructional activities, classroom organization, instructional goals, and conflicts teachers faced about their instructional practices. Memos were written throughout the analysis process for later theoretical sorting.

Findings from the analysis of the interview data were confirmed in two ways. First, the authors reviewed the identified codes and categories independently to confirm that they had similar findings. Second, the authors invited the participants to meet to discuss the findings. Three of the teachers attended the meeting and agreed that the findings accurately explained their approaches to instruction in their classrooms.

Findings

The initial conceptual categories identified during substantive coding included Planning, Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, Play, Teacher's role, Students, Parent input, Administrator input, and Teacher Training. These preliminary categories had clear connections to the topics addressed in the interview questions.

During theoretical coding, the core category and basic social psychological process "facilitating learning" emerged. The process included three other categories: "choosing a setting," "deciding content," and "addressing other

viewpoints" and explains the pedagogical approaches Head Start preschool teachers use to meet increasingly rigorous curriculum requirements and higher expectations for student learning. Coding families were utilized to develop the properties and dimensions of the categories and the connections between them. Through a careful theoretical sorting of the memos, a rich non-linear integration of the categories was achieved for this report of the research. The following sections describe the findings, by category, and discuss the relationships among them.

Facilitating Learning
The Head Start teachers facilitated learning in four ways: free-choice play, incidental teaching opportunities, play-like activities, and direct instruction. These can be viewed along a continuum based on the degree of control the students have in the activity and the amount of effort on the part of the teacher to facilitate learning. The students had the greatest amount of control in free-choice play and the effort by the teacher was limited to providing appropriate and engaging materials. At the other end of the continuum, the students had little control, if any, during direct instruction and it required the greatest effort by the teacher who had to plan the activity, create any materials needed, and lead the instruction.

Between those extremes were incidental teaching opportunities and play-like activities. Incidental teaching opportunities were spontaneous occasions for instruction that were generally unplanned by the teacher and during which students typically had little control over the activity, but were willing to participate. The students also had little control over, but were willing to participate in, the play-like activities. The play-like activities required effort by the teacher in creating materials and planning the action that would take place during the activity.

Free-choice play. In free-choice play the children were generally able to move around the classroom, choosing the area of the room in which they played, the classmates with whom they would play, and the classroom materials they used. Teachers reported three ways that they used free-choice play to facilitate learning: to observe students' skills, develop attachments with students, and allow students to learn independently.

First, teachers observed the children during free-choice play to determine their knowledge and skills in all areas of development to help design future instructional activities. In this way, the teachers identified curriculum content that the child was ready to learn or areas where she felt the child seemed to be behind and could benefit from activities to move that development forward:

> I stand off to the side and write down what I see and what I hear to find out where their skill is and where their level of skill is. [Later] I teach only through the small group. Now I sit back and let them play in different areas and I'll just jot down what I see.

Another way the teachers used observation of free-choice play was to determine whether students had gained understandings from prior instruction:

> Their play to me is just as important as their play to them because, again, it allows me to see where they are, if any growth has taken place from what I've said to them as far as introducing things to them.

The second way that teachers reported using free-choice play to facilitate learning was to play with the children to develop an emotional attachment and sense of trust. Teachers believed that because of this bond, students would be more willing to do the classroom activities that they enjoyed less, such as direct instruction:

> So I think that bonding through play with your children is… once you bond with them you can get them to learn whatever you want them to learn because they trust you even when they don't want to sit there and don't want to do numbers. But if they trust you and you bring them over to your small group and you make it like a game they are going to learn from whatever you're putting in front of them.

The third way teachers used free-choice play to facilitate learning was based on their belief that children can learn during independent activities without any planning or control by the teacher:

> When they're playing, they're learning so many other things. They're learning to sort, they're learning to put things in order, they're learning one-to-one correspondence. They learn to put pegs in, make patterns. They learn a lot through playing.

Incidental teaching opportunities. During incidental teaching opportunities, the Head Start teachers facilitated learning by integrating instruction into other activities in the classroom. This was generally not planned ahead by the teacher, but through her knowledge of the curriculum she could engage the child in learning if the opportunity did arise. Teachers sometimes chose to use a play activity they observed to teach a concept. In this way, they changed free-choice play into an incidental teaching opportunity – as control moved from the child to the teacher.

> If I was in the kitchen cooking I would be sitting at the table with them and as they were cooking I would be talking about the color of the food, the type of food we are eating. Or if I was in the math center with them I would be counting with them or talking about what it is that they have. If they had a snake I'd be asking questions. What is a snake? How does a snake crawl or walk? Does a snake have legs?

Incidental learning may also take place during day-to-day classroom procedures. One teacher described an opportunity she had to practice counting while putting materials away with one of the students:

> We were putting the stuff from dramatic play away and he was putting the bottles away. I go, "Wait a second, how many do we have?"

Incidental instruction required that teachers have both an awareness of the concepts in the curriculum and knowledge of topics which individual students may be interested in learning more about:

> They made a garage with the cars and everything, so we talked about how an engine works, which way tires spin, how many tires are on a car, how many tires are on an 18-wheeler.

Play-like activities. Play-like activities were used by the teachers to engage children in learning in ways the teacher assumed the children would enjoy. Play-like activities were different from free-choice play because they were planned by the teacher to teach specific concepts and the student was not free to choose how the action unfolded during the activity.

> No, we don't do dittos, don't do worksheets. No, it's all fun through games. I might make a game out of the animals. Say I had the animals; I would put it on a file folder game and the children will match those animals. We would sit at a table with all the friends and say, "Well what kind of animal is this?"

Teachers also used the planned play-like activities to assess student skills so they could plan future instruction for the child in concepts or skills they lacked:

> Some children have problems even in skipping and we want to allow the children to be able to do all the physical things that they are supposed to be doing at a certain age. So we will play a game just to see if the children are able to skip, not with pulling them out and just saying, "Can you skip for me?" because a lot of the children don't even know what skipping is. But you know we will put on a song, a CD, if we want to see if the kids are capable of doing this. Skip to my Lou, we will play that game. And the children, they just think it's a game, but we're analyzing and observing those children and we are looking at them to see what they can do at this age.

The teachers found that the children enjoyed learning through the play-like activities more than through direct instruction.

> I put five or six sight words across the table and I'll say a sentence and we have fly swatters that I put little characters on and I'll say when you hear that word you need to swat that word and they love that one. So we do that most often because I know that's what they love. But if I just say come over, like we learned farm words this week so it was farm, cow, there was chicken, and I wrote a list of it and we talked about the letters and they just kind of sat there and I said we are going to see these tomorrow. And they were like, "Whatever."

Teachers viewed these play-like activities as a way to lead children to focus on having fun while they were also learning.

> We have this awesome game this year and its shapes and colors and we have them sorting and they don't understand that they are learning their shapes and their colors; they're just playing a game.

Direct instruction. In direct instruction, fully planned teacher-led activities were used to facilitate learning. In these activities, the teachers controlled the students' actions and students had little choice in how they engaged in the activity:

> Sometimes you just need them to sit down and learn something that they can't learn through play. If they just played all day long they'd be running wild and, yes, they are learning through play, but they also need to sit and listen to the teacher.

Teachers often used direct instruction to teach specific skills to students who they had identified as lacking those skills:

> I do call certain kids over. For the most part, I say, "Okay this is what I'm doing in this small group today." Then I'll say, "My first group – I'd like to have this one, this one, and this one. So when you're done with what you're doing over there will you please come over to my table?" At the beginning of the year if I want to work on a certain group with certain skills it was more, "Okay you have five minutes then you need to come over." At this point they know they have their time to play and then they are going to come over.

Direct instruction was more often used to teach the older students in the class. The teachers reported that four year old students should know more than the three year old students, particularly because they would soon be entering kindergarten:

> I concentrate more on the cognitive development for my four year olds than for my three year olds. Like I said, I always expose it to them but I expect more out of my four year olds than I did my three year olds this year. I do believe there should be some structure to get them ready for kindergarten. They have to know to start sitting; that they can't just get up and go all the time.

Teachers reported that the students did not enjoy direct instruction as much as the other methods used to facilitate instruction during which the students had more control, so they avoided forcing them to participate in direct instruction activities:

> If they turn it off, I usually just let them go. I'm not going to force them because if you force them, the next time you try again to do it they're going to turn it off.

Choosing Setting

The Head Start teachers facilitated learning by choosing the setting in which instruction would take place in their classrooms. They had to decide whether learning would be optimized by doing an activity with individual students, a small group of students, or the whole class. Choosing the setting for instruction primarily applied to play-like activities and direct instruction.

Individual instruction. In individual one-to-one instruction, the teacher, or the classroom aide under the teacher's direction, worked with one student. This approach to teaching was most commonly used when a student had an

Individualized Education Program (IEP), which required that specific goals be reached with that student, or when a student had a unique gap in knowledge or skills. The teachers reported minimizing individual instruction, when possible, because other students might judge that individual as being less capable than the rest of the class:

> I don't like to do one-on-one unless I absolutely have to because everybody knows why so and so is sitting over with the teacher. What don't they know? The older kids know that if you're one on one, that the child isn't understanding something.

One teacher said she chose a small group setting for instruction instead, whenever possible, so that the individual child who has been identified as needing the instruction did not feel singled out.

> I do know that some of our children do need the one-on-one but if they are comfortable with another child playing or interacting with them I would prefer to do it like that because I don't really like putting children on the spot, making them feel like this is something they have to do. But again I do feel that children learn on different levels and I just think we just have to pick and choose to do what is best for that child.

Small group instruction. The most common setting for facilitating learning in the Head Start classrooms was small group instruction. Teachers often used play-like activities with a small group of selected students, often chosen because there was a concept that the teacher believed they all needed to learn.

> Some things are better in small groups, some things aren't. It just depends on what it is. If the child is struggling, I find sometimes small groups are a little bit better. If I have three kids that are struggling with recognizing the color blue I find that if during play time I bring a small group over and do an activity that concentrates around blue; then sometimes that's a little bit better.

Teachers often reported conducting direct instruction in a small group setting because it allowed them to confirm the students were learning something new each day.

> Each teacher will take a group and on a daily basis each teacher is working with a small group of kids but one may be working with math skills, another may be working with reading skills and so forth. We are all working with different skills so in the run of the day we know that those children have gotten more out of their day than just sitting on a rug playing or going outside.

Whole class instruction. Learning was facilitated in the Head Start classrooms through whole class activities such as circle time and reading to the children. The teachers reported that circle time was an opportunity to share news with the class, to supervise the development of social skills, and to review concepts:

> In circle time we sing good morning to everybody, everybody says their names. I have the Number Rock [song] which is kind of jazzy and fun and I have a big chart and as they are all singing I'm pointing to the

> numbers going from 1 to 20, and I have a couple parents there singing along with us.

Teachers reported limiting the length of circle time to accommodate the developmental needs of the young children.

> That is about fifteen minutes. I cannot have a circle longer than fifteen minutes. The children are too young; they get too antsy.

Teachers generally did not expect students to gain much knowledge during the whole class activities, but they saw it as an efficient way to introduce concepts that would be learned in more depth in a small group activity at another time:

> We will touch on something in a large group circle and especially for the ones that we see we will intervene with all the children in small group.

Deciding Content

Head Start teachers facilitated student learning by designing instruction to address specific content. They used three sources of information to determine the concepts they would teach the children. These include the Head Start Creative Curriculum, their understanding of the child's current knowledge, and the contents of the kindergarten readiness test that students typically take at the end of their last year in preschool.

Creative Curriculum. The curriculum provided by Head Start gives teachers very specific information about the concepts and skills the students should be learning:

> We have the Creative Curriculum and the Creative Curriculum has fifty goals in there, and in those fifty goals there is three stages and its step one, two, and three. Step one is the beginner, and that's usually when they're first starting out. If the child is coming in for the second or third year then they would naturally be not at the beginning stages; they would be at the more or less that second stage or the accomplished stage.

Teachers saw the Creative Curriculum as a resource to create developmentally appropriate activities, rather than using direct instruction. At the same time, they saw it as limiting their options to facilitate learning through means they would like to use:

> Creative Curriculum is only play, you don't instruct them, you don't question, you don't ask them like "Let's count to ten." With Creative Curriculum I guess you're not really supposed to do that. We are not supposed to teach them how to write their name by just giving them a piece of paper and saying "Okay write your name." But you never show them the letters on how to write their names because we're not really supposed to teach them the alphabet.

The curriculum included assessments that teachers could use to identify the specific skills to work on with each child.

> We have progress and planning reports and we mark them on the computer and we mark what stage they are and if they have not accomplished the first stage then there is another set that's the forerunners. We do ESI's through the year. It's called an Early Screening

Inventory. I would take you in the room and it's a fifteen minute inventory. We would do the ESI on them and see the progress they've made. We see where they are and things we can work on the next time with them.

Child's current knowledge. Teachers did not rely entirely on the Creative Curriculum to choose the concepts and skills the students should learn. Their estimation of the child's current knowledge was also important in facilitating learning in their classrooms:

We have the opportunity to pick and choose our activities. Sometimes the activities that are given in the Creative Curriculum, sometimes our children are past that and we have to be creative to kind of use that same curriculum, but in a more advanced way to meet the needs of our children.

The teacher's knowledge of child development, in general, was combined with their understanding of each child's individual ability when facilitating learning. In particular, the teachers mentioned adjusting the instruction based on the needs they perceived of different aged groups of students.

I think this curriculum is awesome for the twos and early threes, but when you're talking about kids at four they need more structure and more to challenge them. You can't challenge them if they're just playing and then they start to get bored and then you get behaviors.

When asked whether the expectations of the Creative Curriculum were appropriate for her students, another teacher described how she uses her familiarity with a child to individualize the curriculum:

Sometimes I think they're a little bit too much. For a two year, nine month I think it is a little bit high, but we have two year, nine months that are Einsteins, so, I mean, I think it depends on the child. Okay, I think you actually just individualize for the child and then give them a chance. We're the teachers that are with them every day and even if something in their assessments say we'll bring them to this level, I know if they're ready to go there or not. You know what I mean? And if they're not, I'm not going to push them to something that's going to frustrate them.

Kindergarten readiness goals. The teachers were particularly concerned about preparing their four year old students for kindergarten and reported that they believed a student's performance on a kindergarten readiness assessment was a reflection of the quality of their teaching. This influenced the ways they facilitated learning with their students:

So I always feel pressured because I make sure they learn what they are supposed to learn. I ask every parent every year, "How did they screen? Did they screen higher?" And if they did screen a little lower I worry -- Oh my God did I not teach them that? Did they not get it from me? I really do think it is a reflection of my teaching.

They used their understanding of the current expectations of students in kindergarten classrooms to guide instruction of the older students in their classroom. One teacher reported:

> I've developed my teaching the way that I know that they are going to get the skills that they need for kindergarten. I know they are going to know their ABC's, I know they are going to know their numbers, I know they are going to see sight words and know how to read it because I have my certain ways that I do that. I'm hoping it sticks with them. And when I have my parent-teacher conferences I tell them what I do and I give them ideas, "Here do this with them at home."

Another teacher said:

> I am big on literacy and I know that literacy is big in the standards and school now so I really want my kids to go to kindergarten with a big variety of literacy skills.

Preparing the students for kindergarten resulted in the teachers separating the younger students from the older students, so that those who would be entering kindergarten could receive instruction in the specific skills they would need:

> Sometimes we have three and four year olds, so we know the four year olds are going to kindergarten so we try to do activities that gear the kids to get to kindergarten separate. Then we do the other activities also, but we don't do them all at once because the kids that are going to kindergarten, they need to know how to write their name.

Addressing Other Viewpoints

The Head Start teachers reported that they consider the viewpoints of the administrators of their Head Start center and the parents of their students when they choose how they will facilitate learning in their classrooms. During the interviews, several of the teachers mentioned receiving feedback from others about their methods of teaching. Most frequently they mentioned differing viewpoints about whether activities in a preschool classroom should focus primarily on direct academic instruction or learning through free-choice play.

Administrators. Several teachers stated that their understanding about the likelihood that children could learn through free-choice play differed from their administrators' viewpoint. Most of the teachers believed they valued learning through play more than the administrators at their center.

> I listen to what they have to say and then I explain my reasoning after as to why I believe they should play. Then, honestly, when they leave I do what I want, within reason obviously. A lot of times they say there is too much but it fits into my routine, fits into the rules so… I listen and I try to explain and sometimes they are understanding and sometimes the administrators, they don't understand and they come with their philosophy and we just agree to disagree a lot of times.

There were some teachers who reported their administrators encouraged them to use more free-choice play, but they preferred to facilitate learning through play-like activities or direct instruction:

> They just think it is over their head, it is too much. But I don't think it is because, you know, they are getting familiar with the days of the week. We have songs for that, and okay maybe they are not grasping the concept, but they are learning something. You know I am pointing and they are getting familiar with the letters and the numbers.

A few of the teachers reported that due to a Head Start policy change, they were discouraged from using the calendar as an instructional tool during circle time, as they had in the past, because it was too abstract for the students and, therefore, developmentally inappropriate:

> Two years ago we got a thing in our mailbox explaining why you shouldn't do calendar. One of the supervisors doesn't like it. They haven't ended it, but they don't like it. Our supervisors don't and they put a thing in there claiming that the kids don't understand yesterday, they don't understand today, and that some kids actually have a fear when you get to the end of the numbers that there is no more. I guess there have been studies on it – that once they see the last number on the calendar they get scared. They get confused because they don't understand that there is actually another month and there is more numbers. We actually got this pretty good article on it but…

Parents. While parents do not set policies for Head Start classrooms, the teachers felt obligated to address any concerns the parents raised. Unlike students in other school settings, preschool students are brought to their classroom each day by a caregiver, increasing the interaction between parents and teachers and, thereby, the influence of parents on classroom practices. Many of the teachers mentioned that parents wanted greater emphasis on direct instruction than the teachers would generally include in their facilitation of learning.

> Parents don't like when kids go home and they ask their kids "What did you do all day?" and the kids say "Play." Parents are like "All they do is play in here all day." You know what -- for a good part of the day, yes, they do just play. Because the parents don't understand that kids learn, they learn from play, they learn everything, every area that I told you that we have to develop with them they learn during play. They learn it from each other they learn it by themselves. They learn problem solving. These are all steps towards higher skills and parents just don't understand.

Teachers reported appeasing parents and attempting to increase the parents' engagement in the children's education by providing them with worksheets to use at home, even though they would not use them in the classroom.

> The agency or administrators, they would prefer if we not even use a worksheet. We want the child's idea and mainly that's what we do in the classroom. It's just that sometimes the parents don't understand that we allow the children to be creative because the parents are looking for that more instructional activity thing. So we do it to kind of meet the needs of

> the parents and make them feel like they are getting involved. But what we do in the classroom is based upon that child's creativity. It is really based on the creativity of the child and really to tell you the truth the worksheets are something we do just to get the parents involved.

Some teachers reported that parents pushed for more academic learning because they were concerned about the children being prepared for kindergarten.

> Parents today very much worry because school is hard now and the standards in school are harder and they're higher so they want their kids going to kindergarten reading.

Teachers did not always meet parents' requests for more emphasis on direct instruction. Instead they explained to parents that some forms of instruction, such as traditional worksheets which require specific answers, are not developmentally appropriate.

> I know we have a very difficult time explaining to the parents why we do not do dittos. They want them to do dittos; they want them to sit down and do more structure and we try to explain to them that you don't need a ditto to know how to write your name, you don't need a ditto to know your numbers and colors.

Discussion

We interviewed Head Start teachers to determine the approaches to teaching they used in their classrooms. We wanted to know how they helped their students learn in the current early childhood education climate where there is an increased emphasis on academic instruction to meet learning standards. The core category and basic social psychological process that emerged from the data was facilitating learning. We found that the primary goal of all the teachers was to make sure their students were learning the skills and concepts they were expected to gain in preschool. They used free-choice play, incidental teaching opportunities, play-like activities, and direct instruction in their classrooms to help the children learn. In the play-like activities and direct instruction, the teachers conducted planned lessons with individual students, small groups of students, or the whole class. They chose the concepts and skills to teach the students using Head Start's Creative Curriculum and their familiarity with the gaps in the students' knowledge and skills. The teachers' facilitation of learning was also influenced by the expectations of their Head Start center administrators and the parents of their students.

In general, the findings from this study show that the teachers interviewed used empirically and professionally recommended practices (Ashiabi, 2007; Hanley, Tiger & Ingvarsson, 2009; Lee, 2006). For most instruction, teachers planned lessons that used play-like activities. Occasionally they facilitated learning during children's free-choice play, changing those child directed activities to incidental teaching opportunities. These approaches to teaching are appropriate because they allow preschool students to engage in activities they enjoy as they construct knowledge (Gronlund, 2001).
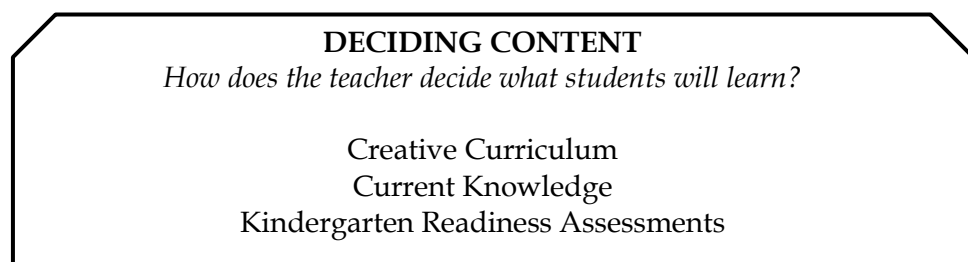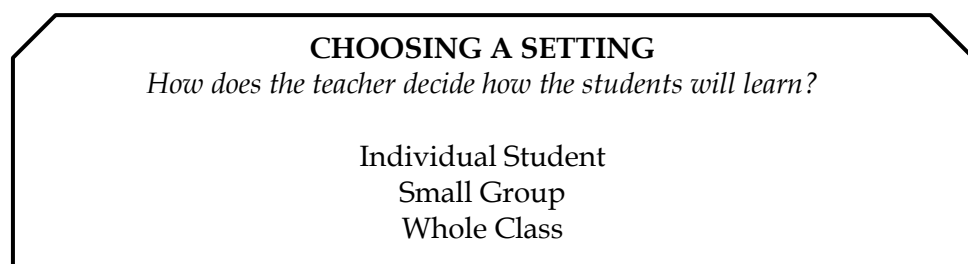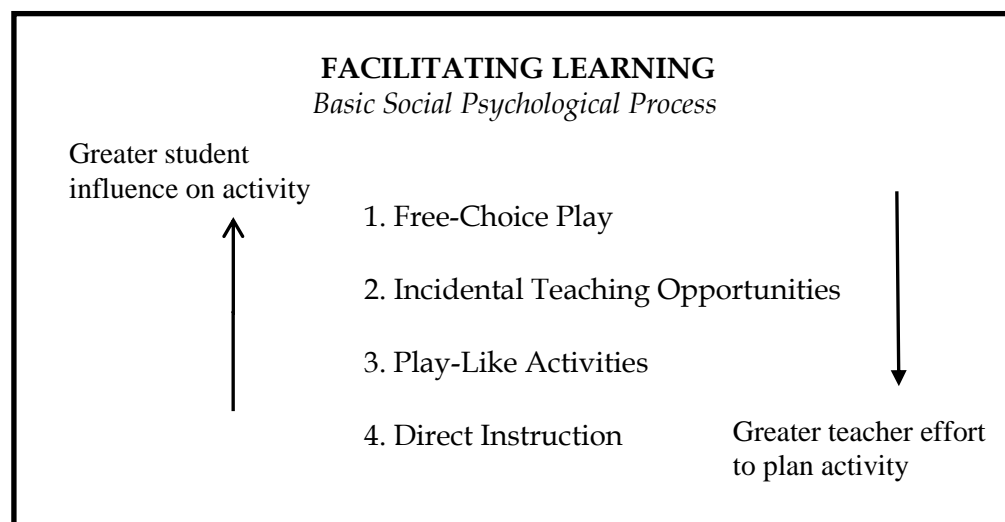
Implications

Utilizing play and play-like activities as the primary means of preschool instruction can provide more enjoyable learning experiences for the students. In order to do that, and avoid resorting to didactic methods, the teachers must feel confident that this approach provides children with everything they need to learn and teachers must have the pedagogical skills to implement learning though play (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot , 2010). Further, while all of the Head Start teachers reported valuing developmentally appropriate classroom practices, they did not always feel they had the option to structure classroom activities exactly in the way they believed best served the developmental needs of their students. Their own concerns about their students' performance on kindergarten readiness assessments, along with comments from parents and directives from supervisors, pushed them to include direct instruction of academic skills rather than allowing learning to unfold through the mechanism most natural to the children they teach – play (Brooker, 2011; Emfinger, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Research about the influence of administrators and parents on Head Start teachers' classroom pedagogical practices is clearly an important next step. Studying the conflicts among preschool stakeholders about what are appropriate instructional methods for young children can reveal the reasons behind them and lead to effective ways to address them. It may be found that administrators and parents are less aware of appropriate preschool teaching methods (Stephen, 2010) and may need information about best practices with young children so that they can provide more informed feedback to teachers and influence instruction in ways that support children's enjoyment of learning. This is particularly critical as children start their formal education.

Overall the findings from this study may not be unexpected, but they are important. This study, uniquely, looked at Head Start teachers perspectives on instruction across the Head Start learning framework. While it was not the intent of this study to develop a typology of Head Start classroom activities, the findings can provide teachers with some guidance in designing instruction. Figure 1 provides a conceptual construct based on our findings that summaries the strategies teachers can consider as they organize learning opportunities in their classrooms. Teachers are provided with a framework for planning instruction that includes facilitating learning, choosing instructional settings, and deciding lesson content. As they identify the skills and knowledge they want their students to gain, they can consider the types of activities and settings that would be most effective to meet those goals. Should a particular skill be gained through discovery within free play or through a teacher-led play-like activity? Should small groups be used for instruction? If so, how should those groups be formed, and, specifically, which students should work together? This type of planning exemplifies intentional teaching, a current movement in education which encourages early childhood teachers to share responsibility for learning with their young students and to both plan for organized learning experiences and recognize unplanned opportunities for teaching in their

classrooms (Epstein, 2014). Through this mindful planning, teachers can develop effective, fun, and developmentally appropriate instruction that addresses the needs of individual students and prepares them for the classroom structure and instruction they will encounter in later grades.

Finally, it is important to note that although the teachers interviewed for this study typically used professionally recommended practices, some of them revealed a lack of awareness of the subtle ways learning changes as children move from free-choice play, where the children have control of their activities, to incidental teaching led by the teacher, and then to play-like activities entirely planned by the teacher. While the teachers recognized that most students do not like direct instruction, some of them assumed that children were not bothered by the interruptions of their free-choice play for incidental instruction as well as the play-like activities. Even though these are designed by teachers to be fun and play-like, they must be sensitive to students' reactions to teacher-imposed activities. If they are not, student degree of engagement, and thereby the amount of learning, is reduced. Teachers must consider whether children can learn more by being immersed in uninterrupted free-choice play instead (Gray, 2013).
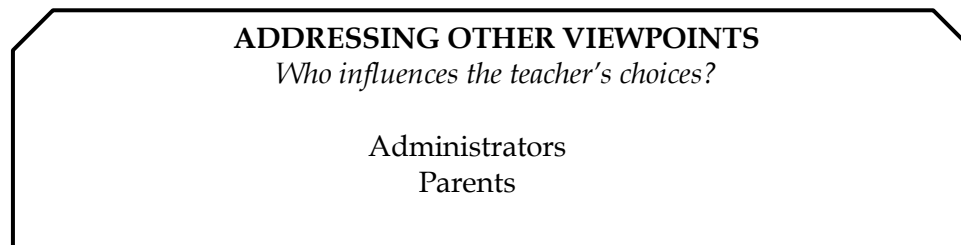
FACILITATING LEARNING
Basic Social Psychological Process

Greater student influence on activity

1. Free-Choice Play

2. Incidental Teaching Opportunities

3. Play-Like Activities

4. Direct Instruction

Greater teacher effort to plan activity

CHOOSING A SETTING
How does the teacher decide how the students will learn?

Individual Student
Small Group
Whole Class

DECIDING CONTENT
How does the teacher decide what students will learn?

Creative Curriculum
Current Knowledge
Kindergarten Readiness Assessments

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ADDRESSING OTHER VIEWPOINTS
Who influences the teacher's choices?

Administrators
Parents
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Figure 1. Approaches to teaching used in Head Start classrooms.

Relevance and Limitation of Findings

Head Start policies, curricula, teacher training, and the role of parents are generally uniform across the country, so interviews of other groups of Head Start teachers may have findings similar to those from this study. While our participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program at our institution, they had a number of years teaching experience and had established beliefs about effective instruction of their own. Also, they volunteered to participate in this study and were not chosen based on their philosophies about teaching in their classrooms.

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