A Qualitative Study of Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs about Key Preschool Classroom Experiences

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to uncover early childhood educators' beliefs about how to best work with children getting ready for kindergarten. The study involved 11 focus groups with providers from three types of early education settings located in Los Angeles County: (1) public center-based programs, (2) private center-based programs, and (3) family child care programs. Results from the qualitative data analyses revealed three types of preschool classroom experiences that participants believed to be important when working with children who are getting ready for kindergarten: (1) types of teacher-child interaction, (2) children's learning environment, and (3) types of learning opportunities. Each of these dimensions was made up of several factors. Although educators from all three types of early education programs mentioned these dimensions, there was variation among the factors that make up each dimension, with differences between and within center type.

Introduction

School readiness—a young child's preparation for K–12 success—is commonly discussed in the early childhood education literature. Research has shown that preschool, particularly high-quality preschool, plays an important role in developing many of the cognitive and social skills that researchers as well as educators consider to be essential for school readiness (Barnett, 1995; Belsky et al., 2007; Burchinal, 1999; Dunn, 1993; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a, 2002a, 2003b). However, there is significant variation in how parents, teachers, and early childhood caregivers define school readiness (Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz, & Rosenkoetter, 1989; Harradine & Clifford, 1996, Vartuli, 1999; Wesley & Buysee, 2003).

What early childhood caregivers believe that children should experience before entering kindergarten (i.e., teacher belief systems) has important implications for the school readiness of children in such early childhood settings as preschool. For example, teacher belief systems have been shown to be a major determinant of teacher classroom decision making (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Vartuli, 1999) and are responsible for classroom climate and socialization processes (Vartuli, 1999). Although a number of studies examine parent and teacher beliefs about school readiness, no studies examine differences in these beliefs across different types of early childhood care providers (Hains et al., 1989; Harradine & Clifford, 1996, Vartuli, 1999; Wesley & Buysee, 2003). Because children may experience a range of early learning settings, it is important that we understand what caregivers in those various settings believe about what children should experience prior to entering kindergarten.

This study aimed to address this gap in the literature. As such, we conducted focus group interviews with early childhood educators from three types of early learning settings—private center-based programs, public center-based programs, and family child care centers—and asked them to tell us about the types of early learning experiences they believe children should experience prior to entering kindergarten.

Quality of the Environment

Previous studies have shown a link between classroom quality—as measured by observable processes (e.g., caregiver responsiveness) and structure (e.g., teacher training) in early child care settings—and children's cognitive and social development (Barnett, 1995; Belsky et al., 2007; Burchinal, 1999; Currie, 2001; Dunn, 1993; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002a; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004). Specifically, the research shows that higher classroom quality in early childhood learning environments is predictive of child cognitive and social outcomes, with children who experience higher quality doing much better than children in lower-quality early learning environments (Burchinal, Howes, & Kontos, 2002; Lamb, 1998). So what predicts classroom quality? The research indicates that among center-based and family-based programs teacher education and training predicted quality of the classroom environment (Burchinal et al., 2002; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien, & McCartney, 2002; Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman, & LaGrange, 2006; Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1995). Evidence also indicates that training in early childhood education or related fields is significantly predictive of classroom quality compared to training in other disciplines (Doherty et al., 2006). While teacher education has been found to predict the quality of the environment across center- and family-based programs, the research also shows that there are differences across program type that have implications for children's outcomes.

Specifically, researchers have found that center-based programs tend to offer more space, toys, educational materials, and a more-structured curriculum compared to other programs, including family-based programs and relative care (Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Fuller, Kagan, Loeb, & Chang, 2004; Kontos, Hsu, & Dunn, 1994). While the evidence is somewhat mixed, a series of studies indicate that children who participate in center-based care, such as Head Start, prior to entering kindergarten demonstrate better cognitive and language skills and have fewer behavior problems compared to children in family-based programs or in informal relative care of similar quality (Clarke-Stewart, 1991; Dowsett et al., 2008; Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2002; Loeb et al., 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002b, 2003a). While these differences may appear to put children in center-based programs at an advantage, research also shows that family-based programs are more flexible about children's schedules and formal learning activities, and they provide more positive adult-child interactions (Kontos et al., 1994).

Still, teacher training and type of program are not the sole determinants of classroom quality; teacher beliefs about what children should experience and know play an important role in the type of classroom experience children have and, ultimately, in classroom quality. Yet few studies have explored early childhood educators' beliefs about how to work with children, that is, what types of experiences and environment teachers should offer preschool children before they enter kindergarten.

Teacher Belief Systems

Given the implications that teachers' beliefs have for quality and children's classroom experiences, it is important to determine what early childhood educators believe to be important for preschool children prior to entering kindergarten. However, while the research shows an association between teacher beliefs and teacher practices, there is some evidence that their beliefs are more developmentally appropriate (i.e., meet the cognitive and age-specific needs of children) than their practices (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1990; Charlesworth et al., 1993; McMullen, 1999). Evidence suggests that a teacher's personal practical knowledge determines his/her decisions rather than the child development and learning theory (Spodek, 1987).

Stipek and Byler (1997) found that early childhood teachers who held stronger beliefs in basic-skill practices, such as highly structured, teacher-directed instruction, were also less likely to endorse child-centered practices, whereas early childhood teachers who had stronger beliefs in a child-centered curriculum also valued child independence and self-esteem (Stipek & Byler, 1997). McCarty and colleagues (2001) found that Head Start educators in lower-quality classrooms are more likely to respond favorably to statements about developmentally inappropriate classroom practices than teachers in higher-quality classrooms. Other studies that have found discrepancies between beliefs and practices argue that experience in the care setting becomes important because teachers, particularly those with low efficacy, find it difficult to maintain discipline using the child-centered practices they attest to believe in (McMullen, 1997).

We know little about what teachers in different types of early learning settings believe are the types of classroom experiences to offer children getting ready for kindergarten. When variation in belief systems among early childhood educators is discussed in the literature, comparisons are typically made between early childhood educators and various early grade-level teachers rather than between different types of early childhood educators. Moreover, these beliefs are often discussed in relation to developmentally appropriate practices that focus on child development in all domains (physical, social, and cognitive) as opposed to academic development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Studies show that, in general, early childhood educators hold belief systems and conduct practices more in line with developmentally appropriate practices (i.e., practices that meet the cognitive and age-specific needs of children) than do teachers in kindergarten through third grade (Buchanan, Burts, Bidner, White, & Charlesworth, 1998; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999). This may be because of the great popularity of child-centered practices in the early childhood education community and the significant influence that developmentally appropriate practice has had on many early childhood training programs (Vartuli, 1999). Another explanation is that educators may be drawn to particular care settings because of these differing beliefs or may develop different belief systems based on unique experiences within each type of setting.

Given the implications that these beliefs have for provider practices and overall classroom quality, which translates into children's preschool experiences, it is important to examine these potential differences in beliefs across different types of early childhood education provider settings.

Research Questions

This study aimed to address gaps in the literature by conducting focus group interviews with private-, public-, and family-based child care program staff serving low-income children in Los Angeles County. Specifically, the research aimed to answer two research questions drawn from the literature provided above. First, with regard to preparing a child for kindergarten, what types of early learning experiences do early childhood educators believe to be important? We hypothesized that teacher belief systems would range from emphasizing the importance of independent play to specific child-guided activities and that they would include a focus on teacher and child interactions that promote learning among students. Second, how do teacher belief systems about what constitutes important experiences vary within and across early childhood learning settings? We hypothesized that educators working in center-based programs would emphasize structured, teacher-driven activities believed to promote learning, whereas family-based child care providers would highlight less structured, child-driven activities.

Method

This Study

The study involved focus group discussions with providers from three types of early education settings located in Los Angeles County: (1) public center-based programs (hereafter referred to as Public), i.e., programs found in publicly funded settings, such as a public elementary school or Head Start; (2) private center-based programs (hereafter referred to as Private), i.e., programs that are managed within private settings; and (3) family child care programs (hereafter referred to as Family), i.e., programs managed within the context of the provider's home. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify early educators' belief systems about the types of experiences they held to be important for children getting ready for kindergarten.

Focus groups were deemed the most appropriate method of data collection because they allow informants to openly discuss their beliefs without feeling targeted, which can occur in a one-on-one interview. Also, focus groups enable researchers to gain insight into complex issues (Keim, Swanson, Cann, & Salinas, 1999), such as, in this case, belief systems about what it takes for a child to be ready for school. The use of open-ended questions and probing techniques allows for participants to dictate the content and direction of the discussion, within the broad framework provided.

Participants

Prior to recruitment, site directors, family-based network coordinators, and key members of the Los Angeles child care community were given an orientation about the study and were invited to participate. Those who agreed to participate assisted with participant recruitment by inviting educators within their program and network to participate in the focus group discussions. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on those who agreed to participate. All participation was voluntary. Focus groups were conducted with educators from each of the three settings (Private, Public, and Family) for a total of 11 groups. Focus groups were conducted by the lead author and two experienced bilingual interviewers who were trained by the lead author.

Participants were from programs throughout Los Angeles County. Our sample includes 75 participants across the three program types (see Table 1). Participants represented a racially and ethnically diverse group, including non-Hispanic whites (19%), Hispanics (53%), non-Hispanic blacks (12%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5%), and "other" (10%). Across program type, more than half the respondents had "some college education" but no degree (65%); a higher percentage of center-based program staff had college degrees or higher compared to family-based program participants. The vast majority of participants were female (93%). Participants included teachers (39%), family-based owners who were also the program's lead teacher (38%), teacher aides (16%), teacher-directors (1%), program administrators (3%), and those who identified themselves as "other" (3%). As described above, focus groups were conducted in English and Spanish. The vast majority of center-based staff chose English as their language of preference. In contrast, the vast majority of family-based participants chose Spanish.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample (%)

	Public Center-based Programs (*n* = 25)	Private Center-based Programs (*n* = 19)	Family Child Care Programs (*n* = 31)	Total (*n* = 75)
Race/Ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic white	24	16	16	19
Hispanic	20	53	81	53
Non-Hispanic black	24	16	0	12
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	5	3	5
Other/Refused	24	10	0	10
Education				
Less than high school	0	0	39	16
High school	0	0	0	0
Some college	72	68	58	65
Bachelor's degree	20	16	0	11
Master's degree	4	5	0	4
Other/Missing	4	11	3	5
Gender				
Female	96	95	90	93
Male	4	5	10	7

Position				
Teacher aide	12	42	3	16
Teacher	84	37	3	39
Owner	0	0	94	38
Teacher-Director	4	0	0	1
Administrator	0	10	0	3
Other	0	10	0	3
Language preference				
English	92	84	26	63
Spanish	8	16	74	37

Procedure

Focus group interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, and the focus groups themselves ranged from 4 to 11 participants. Focus group interviews were tape recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English or both depending on the participants' preference. Simultaneous translation was conducted in focus groups where Spanish and English were spoken. The interviews were conducted by the lead author and two bilingual research assistants. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, when necessary, translated. Transcripts with side-by-side English and Spanish versions were coded for themes by the lead author of the study and a research assistant blind to the hypotheses. Additionally, demographic data were collected. Focus group participation was voluntary, with participants receiving a modest gift for their participation.

Interview Protocol

To learn about participants' belief systems about what they believe children should experience in preschool prior to entering kindergarten, we administered a standardized interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions and probing guidelines to elicit the sharing of ideas in the group setting. Thus, participants were asked primary questions, and, when necessary, we probed beyond the primary questions about teaching beliefs, how flexible their belief systems were, and whether they shared their beliefs with other teachers and parents. The primary question was: Tell me about your thoughts and ideas for working with children who are getting ready for kindergarten. Do you have a specific philosophy regarding the best way to work with the children in order to support their development, their growth? Prompts and probes helped to clarify the intention of the primary question. The following are examples of those prompts and probes: "I would like you to talk to me about your thoughts regarding what is the best way to work with children?" and "I'm going to ask you to think a little bit more broadly about your philosophy about working with kids this age and what you think is most important."

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis, using the focus group as the unit of analysis, was used to identify the type of preschool experiences that early childhood educators believed children need before entering kindergarten. Statements were coded within each focus group transcript. The transcripts were formatted and entered into QSR N6 (2002), a qualitative software program used to identify patterns and themes through key word and phrase searches. Randomly selected transcripts from each program type were selected for code development. All the transcripts were read and coded by hand according to coding methods suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to identify and summarize themes/domains that emerge from the data to answer the questions for specific areas of inquiry.

After conducting several close readings of the transcripts—using methods of grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), an inductive process using textual data—the lead author and a research assistant not familiar with the interview and study objective individually coded the selected transcripts using our research questions as guides. For instance, each coder identified experiences that participants reported as being important learning experiences for children who are getting ready for kindergarten. Each coder labeled each type of "experience" and, when appropriate, combined different experiences into one broad category. For instance, the following response or statement was highlighted by both coders: "…provide activities for them through their age and needs of the children." Each coder labeled the statement separately.

Following individual coding, the coders met to discuss their respective coding schemes and to discuss any discrepancies. Using specific codes or labels identified by each coder, factors were identified jointly. The following excerpt is an example of text that was coded as "being supportive": "If it's because they (the children) are having a bad day or they need emotional support…to be able to be someone that they can go to for whatever reason." In some instances, coders had to agree to re-label specific experiences based on the literature and the context in which the experience was referenced. "Re-labeling" was done for less than 10% of the codes. The coders agreed on over 90% of the labels and broad themes. Following the coding procedure, three dimensions were identified, and factors were listed for each. For example, "being supportive" was categorized under "teacher-child interaction."

Next, all the transcripts were coded using the factors and themes identified in the randomly selected transcripts.

Finally, transcripts were coded using QSR N6, which assigns a code for each term/domain present in each transcript. Focus groups were assigned a "1" if the primary teaching philosophy and related factors were mentioned or discussed. Therefore, within each provider setting, the highest possible number reported at each theme is equal to the total number of focus groups, which indicates that all the focus groups within program type mentioned or discussed a given factor. For instance, if a focus group described being supportive as being an important experience for children who are getting ready for kindergarten, that focus group received a "1" for "Being Supportive." Reference to a specific experience received only one code. In other words, no one factor was coded more than once. This means that the numbers in each cell are an indicator of whether the experience was mentioned, not rankings or indicators of how many times the experience was mentioned within an individual focus group session.

Results

Results from the qualitative data analyses revealed three types of preschool classroom experiences that participants believed to be important when working with children who are getting ready for kindergarten: (1) types of teacher-child interaction, (2) children's learning environment, and (3) types of learning opportunities. As described above, these three types of preschool experiences are defined as dimensions, and each of these dimensions was determined to be made up of factors. Each dimension and its respective factors are discussed in the following sections.

Teacher Beliefs about Teacher-Child Interactions

The first dimension is made up of five factors or types of interactions that were reported as important when working with children getting ready for school: being supportive, establishing trust, encouraging individualization, being a role model, and demonstrating mutual respect. Being supportive refers to supporting or encouraging the child's emotional and cognitive needs. Establishing trust refers to forming a trusting teacher-child relationship that allows the child to feel safe in the teacher's care. Encouraging individualization refers to the practice of treating each child as an individual, that is, paying attention to and responding to his/her individual needs. Being a role model refers to the teacher behaving in a manner that he/she wants the children to behave so children can see the behavior modeled. Finally, demonstrating mutual respect is encouraging and showing mutual respect for one another.

> I think we need to…always show the children that they are being respected, you know, their facts, their ideas…and even down to their behavior…. Treating a child individually, you know, knowing how their development is different from everybody else's, you know, and respecting them, their family.
>
> Gloria, Public center-based teacher

In coding the 11 transcripts from the focus interviews, we found that all Public focus groups and three Private and three Family focus groups reported factors that fell within the teacher-child interactions dimension. Respondents said that the types of interactions that teachers have with children can determine how well children learn and how effective teachers are at conveying given concepts or lessons. Table 2 shows the distribution based on our coding scheme.

Table 2
Types of Teacher-Child Interactions by Program Type

	Public Center-based Programs (*n* = 3)	Private Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)	Family Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)
Teacher-Child Interactions	3	3	3
Being supportive	3	1	3
Establishing trust	1	2	2
Encouraging individualization	3	3	2
Being a role model	3	1	2
Demonstrating mutual respect	1	1	1

As for the types of interactions or factors under teacher-child interactions, results indicated that all Public focus groups and three of four Family focus groups said that being supportive of the child is important because it promotes growth and exploration. A related, yet different, type of interaction was establishing trust; this interaction was reported as important by two Private and two Family focus groups, but only one Public focus group cited this as important. Encouraging individualization was reported by all Public and three of four Private focus groups but only by two of four Family groups as an important interaction. Participants also said that being a role model was important. However, this factor was more salient among Public focus groups (3) than Private (1) and Family (2) focus groups.

> Well to me...the child is always going to be looking at you and looking up to you. So setting a good role model is the first, first thing—you know. I mean, whatever you are going to do, they are going to want to do. And whatever they see you trying, they are going to want to try. So I think that would be the first for me.
>
> Liliana, Public center-based teacher

Demonstrating mutual respect was among the least cited type of teacher-child interaction across all type of programs, with only one focus group in each setting type reporting this as an important preschool teacher-child interaction.

Teacher Beliefs about the Learning Environment

Results from the study indicated that participants believe that the learning environment is another important dimension to consider when working with children who are getting ready for kindergarten. Five factors were coded as important aspects of the learning environment: (1) safety, referred to as an environment that is emotionally and physically safe and without risk of injury so the child can explore; (2) age appropriateness, defined by participants as providing specific activities and materials that match the specific cognitive and verbal skills of the children in their programs; (3) teacher resourcefulness, defined as making use of a naturally occurring phenomenon, such as rain, to illustrate a specific lesson, as well as making use of other resources in the classroom, such as the various colors that surround the children, to demonstrate what each color looks like rather than simply using teacher-made materials; (4) clear rules and consequences, which refers to making the classroom rules and expectations consistently clear to the children while providing some boundaries within which children can learn and grow; and (5) predictability, defined as providing a routine that is predictable—one that the children can count on and that minimizes teacher stress.

Table 3 shows the distribution for each of the factors by program type. The results show that three of four Private and Family focus groups said that safety was an important preschool experience compared to none of the Public focus groups. With regard to age appropriateness, our coding scheme revealed that all four Family focus groups reported this as a key preschool experience compared to two of three Public and one of four Private focus groups. Center-based programs (whether Public or Private) did not report teacher resourcefulness as an aspect of their preschool teaching beliefs, whereas two of the four Family groups did.

Table 3
Learning Environments by Program Type

	Public Center-based Programs (*n* = 3)	Private Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)	Family Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)
Learning Environment	2	3	4
Safety	0	3	3
Age appropriateness	2	1	4
Teacher resourcefulness	0	0	2
Clear rules and consequences	1	0	3
Predictability	1	2	2

The remaining factors showed great variation, with one Public focus group of three and none of the Private focus groups reporting clear rules and consequences as a factor in participants' teaching beliefs. In contrast, three Family focus groups of four said that having rules was key to their teaching beliefs because it helps children learn boundaries and reflect on their behavior.

> I believe we all need to have limits, and when you exceed that limit you need to suffer the consequences. In my case,...I treat them with affection, as if they were [my] family, but we have set limits.
>
> Alicia, Family-program teacher

Finally, predictability was highlighted by half of the four Private and Family focus groups but only one of the three Public focus groups.

Teacher Beliefs about Children's Learning Opportunities

In probing about the types of experiences that participants believe to be important early learning experiences for preschool children, we identified a third dimension, which we labeled as learning opportunities. Learning opportunities refer to the type of learning encounters children have, which is associated with what children learn and how they learn. Based on our analysis, we found seven factors: (1) play, defined as allowing children to be creative and to experiment with skills they have acquired while allowing children to have fun indoors or out; (2) hands-on activities, defined as direct and physical interaction with materials in the classroom and/or playground; (3) peer interactions, which refers to providing children with opportunities to interact with one another; (4) one-on-one activities, defined as activities where the child and the teacher are interacting with each other without the involvement of other students or staff; (5) small group activities, which means activities that are carried out by multiple children and often are teacher-directed, such as working at an activity table; (6) guided exploration, which refers to activities that are teacher-directed but also allow the child to experiment and explore the use of blocks or other classroom materials; and (7) child-guided activities, which are activities initiated and directed by the child during center time where the child has access to blocks, books, pretend play clothes, and other classroom manipulatives.

The results from our qualitative coding scheme indicated that at least half of all focus groups across all types believed that learning opportunities were an important aspect of

children's preschool learning experiences. Table 4 shows the frequencies across focus group type for each of the factors of learning opportunities that emerged from the data.

> The children learn with hands on. They need to experiment with the material, they need to touch, they need to play, they need to discover. So, all their activities need to be open to the children's interest, and they are going to develop in their social, intellectual, and skills while they are playing. So everything is natural, but we need to be open to the children's interests, and let them explore, let them discover.
>
> Selena, Private center-based teacher

Based on our analysis of the transcripts, we found that two of three Public focus groups and one of four Private focus groups said that play was an important learning opportunity to offer children compared to all the Family groups. In contrast, only one focus group across program type said that hands-on activities were an important aspect of their teaching beliefs. Peer interactions were also less salient among Public and Private focus groups compared to two Family focus groups. Public and Private focus groups mirrored each other in two additional types of learning opportunities, with two of each focus group type reporting small group activities and one of each focus group type reporting one-on-one activities as important child learning activities (see Table 4). In both instances, a higher number of Family focus groups said that these types of learning opportunities were important when preparing children for kindergarten. Specifically, three of four Family groups said that small group activities were a key aspect of their beliefs, and two said that one-on-one interactions were important. With regard to guided exploration, one of each program type said that this was a key aspect of their belief system. Greater variation was found across program types in child guided activities. All Public and Family focus groups and two of four Private focus groups said that such activities were an important aspect of how to prepare children for kindergarten.

Table 4
Learning Opportunities by Program Type

	Public Center-based Programs (*n* = 3)	Private Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)	Family Center-based Programs (*n* = 4)
Learning Opportunities	3	2	4
Play	2	1	4
Hands-on activities	1	1	1
Peer interactions	0	1	2
Small group activities	2	2	3
One-on-one activities	1	1	2
Guided exploration	1	1	1
Child-guided activities	3	2	4

Discussion

The aim of the study was to uncover early childhood educators' beliefs about how to best work with children getting ready for kindergarten. We used focus group discussions to gather the data and qualitative methods to analyze the data collected. We achieved the study's aim by asking early childhood educators from three types of preschool settings (Public, Private, and Family) to tell us about their philosophies or belief systems. We examined support for two ingoing hypotheses. Our first hypothesis was that participants would emphasize the importance of independent child activities, including play and types of interactions between teacher and child, in enforcing key lessons taught. Results from our study supported this hypothesis as indicated by the three overarching categories that emerged from the data.

Our second hypothesis speculated that center-based programs would differ from family-based programs in that center-based educators would place more importance on a more structured, teacher-driven environment, and family-based educators would highlight unstructured, child-driven practices. However, the results did not confirm this hypothesis. Instead, we found great variation within center-based programs and across center- and family-based care. We discuss these findings in more detail below.

Regarding how to best work with children, that is, what types of experiences to offer children, our findings suggest that participants in our study are keenly aware of the key early learning experiences that are important to children's school readiness—the same kinds that have been found to predict high-quality care (Maxwell, McWilliam, Hemmeter, Ault, & Schuster, 2001; McMullen et al., 2006; Stipek & Byler, 1997), such as positive caregiver-child interactions, safety within the learning environment, and stimulating learning opportunities (Adams & Rohacek, 2002; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004).

We found that participants in our study believe that three dimensions of classroom experiences were important for children getting ready for kindergarten: teacher-child interactions, learning environment, and learning opportunities. Each of these dimensions was made up of key factors or experiences. We also found greater variation at the factor level than the dimension level. For instance, we found that there was no variation among program types when looking at teacher-child interactions more broadly. However, when we examined the frequencies of instances where a specific type of teacher-child interaction was discussed, we found differences among the three types of groups. Specifically, we found that all Public focus groups said that being supportive of children, encouraging individualization, and being a role model were important types of teacher-child interactions. In contrast, with the exception of encouraging individualization among Private focus groups and being supportive among Family focus groups, no more than half the Private and Family focus groups said that any of the teacher-child interaction types that emerged from the data were important. This finding does not suggest that participants from these groups do not value these types of interactions, but it does suggest that such interactions seem to be less salient among these groups or to the participants in the focus groups.

An alternative explanation, however, is that the Private-based centers in our study place a higher value on addressing children's specific needs and that in so doing, they may feel that they are demonstrating respect and are being supportive of their children. While research has shown that education in early childhood education and certification in early childhood are predictive of developmentally appropriate practices (McMullen, 1999; Smith, 2002; Snider & Fu, 1990), we suggest that differences in personal attributes, such as attitudes about child development, are more likely to generate differences between the philosophies of family- and center-care providers than would differences in education and training. This idea supports previous research by Berk (1985), who found that child-oriented attitudes were related to teacher behaviors, such as encouragement and indirect guidance. Kontos, Howes, and Galinsky (1996) found that teacher training did not affect family-based providers' interactions with children (i.e., process). Instead, Kontos and her colleagues suggest that it is difficult to change teachers' preexisting patterns of interactions with children.

With regard to the learning environment, we found that compared to Public and Private focus groups a higher number of Family focus groups said age appropriateness, teacher resourcefulness, and having clear rules and consequences were important. While we concede that teacher resourcefulness may be too broad to capture center-based programs that have rules and regulations for, say, playing in the rain, we argue that the responsibility that comes from owning a family child care center puts the learning environment at the forefront compared to center teachers who may also rely on center directors to ensure that the center is safe and meets program regulations. Furthermore, while previous research has shown that center-based programs had more structure compared to family-based programs (Kontos et al., 1994), we argue that the amount of independence an educator has with regard to decision making about the learning environment in his/her classroom is associated with teachers' classroom structure and beliefs about the types of experiences to offer children.

Alternatively, the differences we find may be by-products of larger contextual factors that govern how much independence educators may have over their teaching environment, as seen with the variation we find in the types of learning opportunities reported by participants. For instance, there was more variation in the types of experiences that family-based providers noted compared to center-based educators. Specifically, we found greater variation when comparing the two center program types to family-based participants. Family-based groups reported more variation in the types of learning opportunities that they believe they should offer children getting ready for kindergarten. Play, hands-on activities, small group activities, and one-on-one activities were more salient among family-based participants than center-based programs. This finding does not suggest that center-based educators do not value these types of activities. Instead, this may suggest that center-based staff may have more imposed structure to adhere to. Previous studies have shown that family-based programs tend to have more flexibility than center-based programs (Kontos et al., 1994).

Variation in children's experiences may also be a result of teacher training in early childhood education. Family-based participants in our study participate in a network of providers who have access to workshops on how to work with children. In contrast, center-based educators must take courses at a local college or university to gain additional early childhood training. Future studies should collect information on all types of education and ongoing professional development among staff. For this study, we only collected

information on the highest level of education, but we do not have data on the participants' ongoing professional development. Still, our results indicate that when looking at broad, general learning experiences that educators deemed important to provide children preparing to enter kindergarten, we see little variation across program type.

In sum, we learned about what early childhood educators in our study believe to be important early childhood learning experiences when working with preschool children and the variation in those beliefs within and across program types, which has not been done previously. Still, we acknowledge that our study has some methodological limitations. First, participants self-selected into the study, which limits the range of responses we could have collected from a randomly selected sample. Second, respondents represent a select group of early childhood programs who were recruited by center administrators and informal networks, which limits the generalizability of the results. Third, focus groups may represent views and values by the more outspoken members of the group, possibly encouraging a more group approach than individual beliefs. However, "social desirability" can also be found in individual interviews. A fourth limitation is the lack of information about participants' early childhood education and training. However, given that the data are based on group responses, we would not have been able to determine whether individual-level early childhood education was linked with belief systems. Finally, the programs in the study are not representative of all early childhood centers in Los Angeles County. However, we believe that the beliefs and their subcomponents that we present here add to the research literature related to early childhood education and teachers.

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