

Considering Western Canadian Parents' Perceptions of Children's Play in Development
and Learning

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Abstract

The present study employed a basic, qualitative interpretative design using semi-structured focus groups to investigate the cultural perspectives and developmental assumptions of play among Saskatchewan caregivers using secondary data from its larger project, Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play (NowPlay). These focus groups were organized and run by a member of the research team, with the student researcher being tasked to transcribe, review, and discuss the data from these preliminary focus groups as part of her thesis research study. Sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) supported the analyses of the data generated from the interviews.

Four major themes emerged from the interview data. The first theme, *The Nature of Play: Dominant, Divergent, and Diverse Conceptualizations*, captured key similarities and differences among three distinct conceptualizations of play which emerged from the participants' narratives. In the second theme, *The Value of Play: Developmental Benefit in Six Key Areas*, participants described play positively as a natural, developmentally-appropriate activity. Six key areas of development emerged, triangulated across the 14 parents: (1) intrapersonal; (2) socio-emotional; (3) language; (4) cognitive; (5) physical; (6) career and economic. The third theme, *Constraints to Children's Opportunities to Play: Play's Decline*, centered on the cultural constraints (i.e., scheduling and structuring of children's activities; the curtailing of play according to cultural standards of behaviour) and individual constraints (i.e., safety concerns, parental resources) affecting the provision of play. Finally, the fourth theme, *The Agenda for Play: Activities Supporting Learning and Achievement*, the participants reported diverse means of guided participation in culturally-relevant activities which oriented children toward goals which were commonly tied to children's learning and achievement. The research revealed new knowledge specific to an understudied group, Western Canadian families, about perceptions of play and differences in family play practices. It is expected that the findings will inform the work of the research team at the University of Saskatchewan as they adapt a psychometrically-sound instrument of play beliefs designed with cultural considerations for our unique sociodemographic region.

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1 Introduction

Play researchers and theorists acknowledge the central role of play in the lives of children and support and advocate play practices (i.e., play grounded activities such as guided play, recess) for children in the early years (e.g., Bergen, 2014; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009; Vygotsky, 1977). Similarly, major organizations such as the Canadian Association for Young Children advocate play as "essential in promoting children's healthy growth, development, and learning" (2014, para. 1). In addition, play-based approaches are encouraged at the preschool and kindergarten levels in the Western Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, with particularly strong support evident in the Saskatchewan curriculum (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008, 2012; Manitoba Education, 2010, 2015). Specifically, early childhood curricular frameworks in Saskatchewan support play's role in learning and development as demonstrated by statements such as "play is a natural mode of learning and the foundation for the kindergarten program" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 8).

Despite this enthusiasm, and the recognition of play at curricular and organizational levels, parents in diverse contexts vary greatly in their acceptance of play as an appropriate activity in learning and development (e.g., Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Roopnarine, 2011). Yet, notwithstanding the extant literature supporting the influential nature of parental beliefs (e.g., Goodnow, 1996; McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1995), no published study has examined notions of play amongst the diverse groups of parents residing in the Western Canadian context. Measurement of parental beliefs in relation to childhood activities and routines, including play, has been linked to the understanding of child development in recent sociocultural research approaches (e.g., Harkness & Super, 2006; Rogoff, 1990, 2003). The underlying rationale of this approach is that children's daily activities, including play-based activities, represent instances which are routine and shared with parents (Harkness et al., 2011) and constitute important contexts for child development, especially in the early years (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab & Bruder, 2000; Göncü, 1999, Mosier, Mistry, & Göncü, 1993). Research has demonstrated that parents guide and regulate children's activities in accordance with their beliefs of culturally-appropriate childrearing goals and expectations (e.g., Farver & Howes, 1993; Rogoff et al., 1993). Children's activities are thus expected to vary as a function of cultural and/or socioeconomic background and represent

instantiations of values and beliefs of cultural or social groups, as demonstrated in past studies (Dunst et al., 2000; Harkness et al., 2011; Tudge et al., 1999, 2006). For example, children of highly educated Western parents have been found to be more likely to engage in activities which are assumed to prepare children for schooling, such as play with educational toys and conversations with adults (Tudge et al., 2006).

Let's consider the cultural composition of Western Canada, and specifically the province in which the preliminary data in phase one of this study were gathered (i.e., Saskatchewan). The Western Canadian Prairie provinces are comprised of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Saskatchewan is home to approximately one million inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2017a). According to the 2011 census, two-thirds of the population resided in *population centres* whereas the remaining third were widely dispersed in *rural areas* (Statistics Canada, 2011b). A variety of ethnic origins are represented in the province with the majority group being European Canadian (70.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2017a). The *visible minority* population continues to rise, representing 10.8% of the total provincial population in 2016 as compared to 3.6% in 2006. The most populous visible minorities reported in Saskatchewan were Filipino, South Asian, Chinese, and Black (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Immigrants and non-permanent residents accounted for 11.65% of the population of Saskatchewan according to the 2016 census (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Immigration rates are projected to continue to increase in all scenarios in Saskatchewan with an overwhelming share of immigrants being of Asian origin (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Further, based on past trends, newcomers are much more likely to settle in population centres than those born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Finally, *Aboriginal* or *Indigenous* peoples represent approximately 16.3% of the total population in the province of Saskatchewan, as such the province is home to the second highest concentration of Canadian Indigenous peoples (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

In the current study, sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) provides the theoretical grounds for studying parental beliefs about the value of play. This research is necessary to address the meanings, and significance, parents place on play in Western Canada especially in terms of cultural-variance. This inquiry thereby responds to past calls from researchers in the field for consideration of *culture* in the study of parental beliefs and development (e.g., Bornstein, 2012; Goodnow, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). Sociocultural theory situates children's play within the sociocultural context in the institutions, social and cultural

systems, political and historical practices, and activities of particular communities in which play can occur and can give rise to or shape potential enactments of play (Fleer, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) can be used to explain the existence of patterns and/or regularities and irregularities within communities (Flick, 2007; Rogoff, 2003). Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for thematic analysis was used to identify and report patterns and organize the interpretation of the findings of the present study. Thematic analysis has the advantage of making the assumptions about the nature of data associated with any theoretical framework transparent (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.1 Statement of Purpose

The current research forms part of the Northern Oral Writing and Language Through Play (NowPlay) project, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded project. The team of Canadian researchers (Peterson, McIntyre, & Glaés-Coutts, 2017) leading the project are dedicated to supporting young children's oral language and writing through a play-based assessment and intervention framework. The current study used secondary data from the NowPlay project to explore the cultural perspectives and developmental assumptions of play among parents within the specific context of the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. This expanded focus considers both the traditional discourse on the role of play in learning and development, as well as sociocultural considerations of how diverse values, beliefs and cultural routines of a *community* influence the role of play in children's everyday lives. The data generated from the present research study will inform the adaptation of a psychometrically-sound instrument to measure parental beliefs of play (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004). As the existing surveys measuring parental beliefs reflect culturally-specific content and have been largely targeted to American parents (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004), their utility and relevance cannot be transferred to use with groups of Western Canadian parents. Adaptation of the existing scales is required with consideration for the unique sociodemographic context of Western Canada, which is home to Canadian parents representing a wide range of economic and cultural backgrounds (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Likewise, past scale development researchers in the study of play (Fasoli, 2014; Manz & Bracaliello, 2016) have recommended scale adaptation to ensure reliability and validity across linguistic and/or cultural groups.

This research will be conducted in four stages: (1) survey adaptation: select questions/subscales from existing parental beliefs about play scales used to create an adapted survey to explore parents' perceptions/beliefs of play across cultural groups representative of the prairie population (e.g., Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, and Glick Gryfe's (2008) 26-item list examining parental beliefs and nature of play, Parmar, Harkness, and Super's (2004) Preschool Play and Learning Questionnaire (PPLQ), and Manz and Bracaliello's (2016) Toddlers & Play Scale, etc.); (2) focus group discussions; (3) pilot testing; and (4) field testing.

1.2 Rationale for Study

The findings of the project have the potential to inform researchers, educators, and parents and help bridge social, cultural, and educational gaps relating to play in Canadian classrooms. The research adds to an evolving body of literature which focuses on cultural belief systems and their instantiation in parent cognitions and actions (Harkness & Super, 2006; Roopnarine, Shin, Jung, & Hossain, 2003; Tudge et al., 1999). The knowledge of parents' culturally-specific beliefs can inform the future development of targeted and culturally-sensitive play-based interventions (Manz & Bracaliello, 2016; LaForett & Mendez, 2016) with the goal of enhancing development and well-being of children residing in Western Canada. In addition, in consideration of the importance of congruency across home and school environments for the learning and development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), knowledge of local cultural beliefs is necessary to balance family and school agendas for play. It is envisioned that the findings will inspire future research on the topic of play and other related research topics.

My personal interest in the topic stems from my own play memories as a child growing in an urban environment in Saskatchewan. My memories—from community playgroups to neighborhood games of kick-the-can—have undoubtedly shaped my perspective of play as a valuable childhood activity. I can also perceive the ways in which my cultural and ethnic background as a White, Canadian female identifying with an urban, middle-class community has shaped certain ideas of play (e.g., adults should provide play materials to children). In my adult years, specifically during my undergraduate teaching training. The learning value of play was ingrained and types of play which assist in school readiness (e.g., alphabet songs, dice games to learn math) were emphasized. In my professional experiences, I had the opportunity to work with children and their families in both rural and urban communities across Canada as well as in Europe. In these varied contexts, I was able to observe a much wider range of children's

activities than I had previously been exposed to, which were deemed important to children and adults (e.g., pleasure, cultural learning). These activities included, for example, using carving tools (e.g., to make shelters) in Scout camp and riding snowmobiles and participating in hunting trips with family members in an Indigenous community. My experiences challenged my own assumptions of play. Why are certain play activities regulated or prioritized? Why might adults promote the use of carving tools to encourage autonomy in one community, yet deem the activity dangerous in another community? What might be the resulting implications, if any, for children's learning and development? Simply put, my encounters with play in diverse contexts and my own personal play memories has led to my desire to explore, in a scientific manner, the cultural values and norms held by Saskatchewan caregivers regarding the importance of specific aspects of play to areas of development.

1.3 Defining Key Terms

For the purpose of clarity, it is important to define commonly-used terms in this study.

Aboriginal peoples. An umbrella term for the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America including three groups as recognized by the Canadian Constitution - Indians, Métis and Inuit (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2013).

Accommodation. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1962), accommodation refers to the modification of structures in order to make sense of new information, concepts, or to represent new skills.

Assimilation. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1962), assimilation refers to the matching of information, concepts and skills arising from the interaction with the environment with previously formed mental structures.

Beliefs. Knowledge or ideas that are accepted as true by an individual or group (Sigel, 1985).

Community. A community is a group of people sharing some common organization, values, and practices (Rogoff et al., 1993).

Constructive play. A type of play which increases in complexity and frequency in the toddler to preschool years and involves the manipulation of objects, such as blocks, to create representations (Smilansky, 1968).

Culture. A set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of doing things shared by a given ethnocultural group (Rogoff, 2003).

Dramatic play. A type of play predominating between the ages three to five in which children use objects, actions, and language to create imaginary roles and situations (Smilansky, 1968).

Early childhood education. In Canada, the term broadly reflects child care centres, family child care homes, preschools and nursery schools, and, in the Saskatchewan context, kindergarten as well (Doherty, Friendly, Beach, 2003).

Executive functions. Top-down mental functions necessary in tasks involving attention and concentration with the generally-agreed upon core EFs being inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, 2013; Miller & Cohen, 2001)

Free play. Free play refers to self-directed activities that are engaging, fun, voluntary and flexible. Free play activities are devoid of extrinsic goals, and often contain a make-believe component (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Functional play. A type of play which predominates between birth and age two and involves repetitive muscle movements with or without objects (Smilansky, 1968).

Games with rules. A type of organized play predominating between the ages of 7 – 15 years that has a set of prearranged rules wherein the players must recognize, accept and conform to these rules (Smilansky, 1968).

Guided participation. The collaborative process in which a child and a more competent cultural member participate in loosely or formally-structured activities with a shared purpose and interest in the task, with children observing and participating at a comfortable but slightly challenging level (Rogoff, 1990).

Guided play. A type of playful learning that combines free play and explicit instruction (Toub, Rajan, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016).

Indigenous peoples. A term used to collectively describe the original peoples of North America and their descendants (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2013).

Middle-class. A cultural designation signifying a pattern in which one or more parents work out of the home and engage in family beliefs, values, practices which often accompany extensive schooling, middle-class occupations and income (Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002).

Parents. In this study, a parent is a biological parent or caregiver of at least one child attending daycare, prekindergarten, kindergarten or in grades 1 – 4 at the elementary level in Saskatchewan.

Play. Play is an activity that may assist learning and self-development in young children through spontaneous or planned play activities (Lillard et al. 2013).

Population centre. A populated place, or a cluster of interrelated populated places, which meets the demographic characteristics of an urban area, having a population of at least 1,000 people and a population density of no fewer than 400 people per square km² (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Province. The major political division of Canada, provinces are responsible for matters such as education, property and the administrations of justice, hospitals and municipalities (Doherty, Friendly, Beach, 2003).

Rural areas. Rural areas include all the territory lying outside the population centre (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Visible minority. The Census defines visible minorities as persons, excepting Aboriginals, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in color (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Zone of proximal development (ZPD). The transition state between the child's actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the child's potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, in which learning occurs (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

1.4 Chapter Organization

A review of the literature, including theories and research on children's play and development as well as parents' beliefs and beliefs as they pertain to play is presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 includes the research design, instrumentation and data analyses. In Chapter 4, the participants are introduced and study results are presented. Finally, Chapter 5 is comprised of a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, connections to the related research and the theoretical framework, and suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two major sections. The first section examines the literature on play, including: definitions and classifications of play, theories and perspectives of play, as well as a critical review of the empirical research on the relationship between play and development. The second section delves into parenting research, including: a review of theories related to the effect of the parental environment on child development, and a review of the study of parental beliefs of play.

2.1 Play

2.1.1 Definitions and classifications of play.

Play is a notoriously difficult construct to define as it is multidimensional and varies in meaning across time, culture, and contexts (Cohen, 2006). Researchers from contributing fields and backgrounds have proposed a plethora of definitions, all of which differ in terms of the conceptualization of the nature of play itself, such as lack of externally imposed rules (e.g., Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983) and the focus on specific aspects of play, such as the relationship of play to aspects of cognitive, linguistic or creative ability (Fromberg & Bergen, 2015; Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968). For example, ethnographic studies reveal the pervasive nature of play. All human beings play in all societies (Gosso, 2010; Schwartzman, 1978), yet variance observed in play depends upon individual differences (e.g., age, gender, special needs), cultural contexts (e.g., traditional cultures, Western cultures), and ecological characteristics of the play settings (e.g., classroom play props, playmate's gender) (Johnson, 2006; Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1989; Sutton-Smith, 1997). A developmental perspective considers the increasing maturity of children and complexity of their play (Fromberg & Bergen, 2015). For example, immature play is characterized by limited language use, whereas mature play is characterized by rich language use which creates and maintains play through planning, building, and evolving a scenario (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). An anthropological view of play emphasizes the meanings the player associates with play within varied contexts (Huizinga, 1955; Schwartzman, 1978). Salamone and Salamone (1991), for example, used an anthropological lens in their study on the play of Hausa children in Nigeria (one of the three prominent ethnic groups). The authors devised culturally-specific criteria to categorize an activity as play and noted that for the player, play ceases to be fun and enjoyable when adult intervention is added.

Finally, a sociocultural perspective considers play a cultural activity which is subject to variance in form, content, structure, frequency and setting (Gaskins & Miller, 2009; Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams, & Mintz, 1999; Lancy, 1996). For example, in certain societies (e.g., hunter-gatherer societies), where children are not isolated from adult activities and afforded the opportunity to observe adult activities (e.g., building of huts, caring for infants), play mirrors adult-activities and appears to be work-like (Gosso, 2010; Gray, 2009; Lancy, 2007). This contrasts with a sharp separation among the Western parenting groups of playful participation (e.g., play with fantasy themes) and real participation (e.g., work) in the valued activities of the group (Gray, 2009). Despite the diversity of perspectives, some elements of play commonly run through the scientific literature, such as: (a) spontaneity, (b) freedom from rules, (c) active engagement, (d) intrinsic motivation, (e) a means rather than an end, (f) positive effect on the child in most situations, and (g) both people and objects (Christie, 1991). For the purpose of the present study, play will be defined as an activity that may assist learning and self-development in young children through spontaneous or planned play activities (Lillard et al., 2013). The definition has been selected according to available play literature speculating the potential role of specific aspects of play (e.g., symbolic aspects of play) in learning and self-development.

Play has been categorized in different ways, yet Jean Piaget's (1962) structural approach to classifying play in developmental sequences has been influential notably in the fields of education and psychology (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Piaget defined three categories: practice play, dramatic play, and games with rules. Smilansky (1968) elaborated on Piaget's categories to propose a system for coding the developmental levels of play: *functional play*, *constructive play*, *dramatic play*, and *games with rules*. Smilansky's (1968) classification system focused on the social aspects of children's play (e.g., language, social skills, creativity) that relate to cognitive development. Functional play, which Piaget called practice play (Saracho & Spodek, 1998), involves repetitive muscle movements with or without objects (e.g., repetitively swinging a suspended object) (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). This type of play predominates between birth and age two, but it is nonetheless important throughout the early childhood years (Garner & Bergen, 2015). Constructive play involves the manipulation of objects, such as blocks, to create representations. This form of play increases both in complexity and frequency from the toddler to preschool years. In dramatic play, also commonly referred to as pretend play, children use objects, actions, and language to create imaginary roles and situations (e.g, playing "cowboys"

and using a stick symbolically as a horse). The peak period of dramatic play is between the ages of two to three and five to six years (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Games with rules, predominately seen in the last period of play from about seven until fifteen years (Johnson, 2006; Smilansky, 1968), refers to organized play (e.g., marbles, hopscotch) that is characterized by a set of rules that are transmitted socially from child to child (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969); children must recognize, accept and conform to these rules (Lillard, 1989; Smilansky, 1968).

Play researchers offer many ways of defining and categorizing play (Christie, 1991; Huizinga, 1955; Piaget, 1962). A comprehensive understanding of play necessitates familiarizing the reader with the predominant theories of play on which researchers have based their work.

2.1.2 Play theory.

Play theorists have conceptualized play from various perspectives over many years. Classical theories, including surplus-energy theory (Mitchell & Mason, 1948), recreation theory (Lazarus, 1883), recapitulation theory (Hall, 1906) and practice theory, emphasize concepts such as human energy, instincts, and evolution (Groos, 1898; Hall, 1906). These theories attempt to explain why children play. Modern theories, however, focused on the contributions of play to the child's development (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Three main categories of modern theories need to be considered: psychodynamic, cognitive, and sociocultural.

The psychodynamic perspective, represented primarily by Freud (1966) and Erikson (1977), dictates that children master anxieties and conflicts by bringing them to a level of consciousness that can then be articulated through play. Within this perspective, Freud (1966) claimed that play makes a critical contribution to children's emotional development by relieving children of negative feelings through helping them master trauma or conflict in play (e.g., acting out a traumatic event symbolically by building a tower of blocks and then smashing it down). Erikson (1977) believed that play can reflect children's psychosocial development. He outlined stages of development in which play proceeds, beginning with the autocosmos (world of self), in which the child plays with his or her own body (e.g., repetitive movements of toes) initially and eventually the body of his or her mother. The next stage is a microsphere (miniature world) in which play includes a limited number of objects (e.g., toys) and/or a small group of people with the goal of understanding that the objects and people have characteristics, rules and boundaries (e.g., they can break a toy and not be able to fix it). Lastly, in the macrosphere (shared world), the play actions involve cooperative efforts with a larger group of people (e.g., pretend play,

rule-based games). In common, psychodynamic theorists stressed the critical contribution of play to children's inner development (e.g., ego development, identity development) (Lillemyr, 2009).

Modern cognitive theorists, Jean Piaget (1896 - 1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1899 - 1934), dominate Western discourse in today's educational-settings about play as a developmental phenomenon. Both theorists described play development in specific domains (i.e., cognitive and moral reasoning; language and cognition, social understanding and social-emotional mastery). and viewed play as important for individual development (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978, 1978).

Jean Piaget studied play primarily from a cognitive viewpoint, with the purpose of play being to organize and make meaning out of experiences (Piaget, 1962). In his theory of cognitive development, he introduced the concepts of *assimilation* and *accommodation* as the twin engines of cognitive development (Piaget, 1962). Piaget also believed children progress through a series of cognitive stages (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operations stage) and linked each stage of cognitive development to a particular form of play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). For example, children from age two to seven engage in symbolic play, including both dramatic and constructive play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Play is believed to reflect development (Hughes, 1999), thus it is expected to increase in complexity as children progress through developmental stages (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

According to Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development (1978), play, specifically dramatic play, is seen as the primary activity of preschool children and leading factor in development. Vygotsky (1977) believed that play provides the prerequisites for advanced psychological processes which are later trained in the formal schooling years. Specifically, play provides a way for children to learn self-regulation and master behaviours, such as social skills, language use, and abstract thinking (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Vygotsky, 1977). Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) viewed cognitive development from a sociocultural viewpoint. He argued that play provides a way to socially construct knowledge with more experienced peers or adults, thus creating the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) in which learning occurs. The notion of ZPD is illustrated in the following quotation, "In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). Vygotsky (1978) thus encouraged the active role of adults in stimulating learning in the context of play, wherein the adults set the environment (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Bodrova and Leong (2006) expanded on Vygotskian theory in their argument that the role of adults in the

domain of play involves for example, choosing the toys, encouraging with what and with whom to play, and modelling for children.

Modern sociocultural theorists (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 2003) further developed Vygotsky's views, notably the broader cultural context for learning and development first emphasized in his work (Hogan, 2005). Modern sociocultural theories emphasized play as a cultural activity, as opposed to the traditional developmental perspective of play as an individual activity (Göncü & Gaskins, 2011; Rogoff, 2003). In other words, culture is not an *add-on* to a universal play activity. Rather, it is the origin of what children do in play, the tools children use to master social roles and skills, and the ways in which children appropriate a particular cultural activity with its developmental functions that may vary within, as well as across, cultures (Rogoff, 2003).

Sociocultural theory considers interrelated features of cultural communities (e.g., economic resources, family size, maintenance of traditional ways, and urbanization) simultaneously in order to understand the shared influence on the development of an activity such as play (Göncü, 1999; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). Empirical work grounded in sociocultural theory in addition to research from contributing fields (e.g., geography, anthropology) has revealed important findings regarding both the universality and variance in children's play around the world.

2.1.3 Variance in play.

Cultural universals have been noted in children's play, such as gender preferences (e.g., preference for same-aged play companions) (Maccoby, 1990) and gender performance (i.e., play behaviours). To elaborate, boys typically occupy greater spaces and play farther from home, whereas girls occupy more internal, restricted spaces (Lancy, 1996; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Boys have been found to engage in more exploratory play, while girls engage in more pretend play (Bornstein, Haynes, Pascual, Painter, & Galperín, 1996). Cross-cultural similarities may also exist in terms of particular stylistic features of play (Johnson, 2006), such as the sociality of play (i.e., dyadic or group play) (Göncü et al., 2000) and imagination (e.g., imaginary situation of mealtime) (Bloch, 1989). In addition, the deep structure of certain play forms (e.g., pretend play) appear to be preserved cross-culturally, and adapted locally with different content and themes, names, and play objects (Göncü et al., 2000; Gosso, e Morais, & Otta, 2007).

On the other hand, differences across cultural communities may be evident in the type of activity context in which play arises (i.e., when children play) and numbers of children engaging in specific forms of play (e.g., number of children who engage in group versus didactic play in a given community) (Bornstein et al., 1996; Göncü et al., 2000). Differences in availability of playing partners (e.g., parent or peers) and availability of toys and outdoor play areas (e.g., provision of commercial materials) have also been observed (Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2006; Göncü et al., 2000; Göncü, Özner, & Ahioglu, 2009; Haight & Miller, 1993). As an example, Haight and Miller (1993) conducted an observational study, which involved filming middle-class American household interactions (sample of nine children between 12 and 48 months of age and their families) for 10-15 hours weekly. The researchers found that mothers initiated children's early pretend play and waned in participation over the course of three years as sibling, peer, and solitary play became prominent (Haight & Miller, 1993). However, in many cultures, parents report lower frequencies of their children's pretend play than American parents do (Singer, Singer, D'Agostino, & DeLong, 2009) and/or tend to not engage in pretend play (Farver & Howes, 1993; Gaskins, 2013; Göncü et al., 2000), or may even discourage pretend play (Carlson, Taylor, & Levin, 1998; Gaskins, 2000).

Canadian research exploring the play of children who are from Aboriginal or Indigenous backgrounds, albeit very limited, has revealed the cultural nature of play. For example, Gillis (1991) observed children (n=58) three to five years of age engaged most frequently in motor play such as crawling, climbing, and riding a tricycle, as opposed to other forms of play (e.g., musical instruments), which were rarely observed. Pretend play was characterized by group play, with themes of family observed more frequently than community-related themes, such as scenarios at shops or the doctor. Gillis (1991) asserted that the materials that educators provide to children, as well as the educators' participation in the pretend play, influence the children's play themes.

Göncü, Tuermer, Jain and Johnson (1999) asserted that understanding the nature and role of play in specific cultural contexts requires consideration of economic (e.g., mother's occupation), physical (e.g., toys, setting), and socioecological aspects (e.g., adult beliefs about the value of play). In terms of economic aspects, the caregiver's occupation has been considered to explain variation in children's play. For example, Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) found that children's time spent in free play at home was lower when mothers were employed than when they were not. In fact, children may revert to lower levels of play rather than more complex

forms (e.g., exploratory play over dramatic play) when deprived of basic play materials, adult modelling, and encouragement (Smilansky, 1990).

A limited number of studies have been conducted to examine children's play across physical settings, such as rural versus urban settings. Findings from maternal survey responses of one of the larger studies ($n=830$) on the topic did not indicate a great deal of variance between children's play experiences in urban and rural settings in the United States (Clements, 2004). This runs contrary to the assumption of the rural idyll or the image of a glorious place where children can grow up in safety, and are given access to greater public space for play and recreation (Matthews, Taylor, Sherwood, Tucker, & Limb, 2000; Valentine, 1997). Rural areas may offer children more exposure to natural elements (Yatiman & Said, 2011), yet the assumption of the *rural idyll* is also negated in research conducted in the United Kingdom through interviews and observations of over 400 children aged 5 to 12 (Smith & Barker, 2001) residing in three geographical areas of England and Wales. The areas varied in levels of provision of rural services and reflecting differences in *socioeconomic status*, an indicator which the American Psychological Association (2016) defines primarily based on the factors of income, educational attainment, and occupation. The findings revealed that geographical isolation, large restricted land zones (e.g., farming areas), fear over lack of local supervision, and lack of mobility and play partners in proximity limit play opportunities. The rise of children's technology use (e.g., electronic tablets) (Clements, 2004; Hofferth, 2010) has otherwise been proposed to explain the decline of play in rural areas. Recent reports of American children's (between ages two to eight) technology use indicates an average 3 to 3.5 hours per day spent with media (Commonsense Media, 2011), as compared to 2003 reports for American children ages six months to six years, who spent an average of 2 hours daily (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). Urbanization (Kytta, 2004). Modifications to the natural landscape (e.g., privatization) and/or enforcement of trespassing boundaries (Ward, 1990) have additionally been considered to explain the decline of rural play as it reduces children's independent mobility.

Urban areas typically offer public parks, playgrounds, and formal facilities for children's play (Aziz & Said, 2012). However, access to these play areas may depend on SES since wealthier children are more likely to access them (Aziz & Said, 2012; Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2008). Other barriers to play in urban areas include limited green spaces, increased street traffic, and poor urban planning (e.g., lack of play facilities in public places) (Hüttenmoser, 1995;

Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006). These barriers in the urban environment may restrict or exclude children from public space, thus diminishing opportunities for play (Aziz & Said, 2012; Kytta, 2004; Veitch et al., 2006).

As gatekeepers to play experiences, parents and the parenting role are important considerations in understanding children's use of rural and urban space for play purposes (Aziz & Said, 2012). In urban areas, safety is a major concern for parents (Yatiman & Said, 2011), and their safety-related beliefs may determine the amount of opportunities they afford to their children for active play outdoors (Veitch et al., 2006). For example, cul-de-sacs offer parents a perceived sense of safety, whereas connecting streets are perceived as unsafe for children due to traffic. Children living in cul-de-sacs are thus afforded more opportunities for active play than children living on connecting streets (Veitch et al., 2006). Findings from additional studies (Blakely, 1994; Kytta, 2004; Prezza, 2007) have reiterated that parental beliefs about safety may be the main factors that restrict children's autonomous mobility to play in outdoor environments independently. In addition to parents' safety-related beliefs (Clements, 2004; Tandy, 1999; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), studies have also considered parents' convictions of the developmental importance of outdoor play (Dwyer, Higgs, Hardy, & Baur, 2008; Lambert, 1999) and socialization norms about play practices (e.g., how far a *good* mother would let her child play from the house) (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). These parental notions about play have been found to exert a significant influence on the actualization of play and depend on whether children use the play provisions available to them (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997).

In summary, while play is a universal childhood activity (Gosso, 2010), it is to be expected that children's play varies greatly from one context to another (Gaskins et al., 2006). The exact role of play in development according to parents, researchers and theorists is an area of ongoing debate.

2.1.4 The role of play in development.

The importance of play for individual development has been reflected in theories of play and brought forward by theorists of diverse orientations: Freud (1966); Piaget (1962); Vygotsky (1977). Play has been said to reflect, reinforce, or generate new learning and development (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2005). However, the nature of the relationship between diverse forms of play and children's development is complex. Smith (2010) theorized three potential relationships between pretend play specifically in development: (1) pretend play as crucial to

development; (2) pretend play as one of many routes to positive developments (equifinality); and (3) pretend play as an epiphenomenon of other factors that drive development (something that often goes along with important developments, but does not cause them). Two major developmental theorists, Vygotsky (1977) and Piaget (1962), align with the first and third views, respectively. Lillard et al. (2013) examined the evidence for the three positions in their review of research linking pretend play and development. A number of methodological problems in the play-development research (e.g., nonreplication, unmasked experimenters, small samples, nonrandom assignment) prevented the formulation of any definite conclusions based on the three positions. Nevertheless, the findings of the review, in addition to findings of studies not included in the review focusing on pretend play and other forms of play, illuminate the current state of the play-development research. The review here is limited to the domains of language and self-regulation, since they are frequently claimed to assist in play development in both empirical and theoretical work (e.g., Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1977).

The relationship between pretend play and early language has been a focus of many studies (e.g., Elias & Berk, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1994). Pretend play requires higher order thinking skills, such as symbolic thought (e.g., a banana is used as a telephone) (Bodovra & Leong, 2006; Vygotsky, 1977). Given language is also symbolic (Piaget, 1962), the use of symbols in pretend play is thought to contribute to early language development (i.e., acquiring first words and syntax) (Miller & Almon, 1994)—an epiphenomenal reason (Smith, 2010). Concurrent associations have been established between pretend play and various aspects of language development (e.g., Elias & Berk, 2002; Jurkovic, 1978; Lewis, Boucher, Lupton, & Watson, 2000). The literature suggests that children's pretending may precede language. For example, two cross-lagged studies (Lyytinen, Laakso, Poikkeus, & Rita, 1999; Ungerer & Sigman, 1984) established a relationship between other-directed play (i.e., play indicating interest in others and communication that is then transferred to language) early in the second year on standardized measures (e.g., MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories) of comprehension, vocabulary production, and syntax later in that year. Causality between pretend play and early language development is most plausible of all the developmental links considering the level of consistency of the body of literature, yet a reverse direction of effects (from language to play) is possible (Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1994) as is a third underlying variable (e.g., maternal education) (Lyytinen, Laakso, Poikkeus, & Rita, 1999). Therefore, more controlled

intervention studies are needed to discern play's role in language development (Lillard et al., 2013).

The role of play in the development of self-regulation has also been considered, most notably by Vygotsky (1977). Self-regulation refers to volitional control of attention (i.e., focus) and emotion (i.e., stress physiology and emotional arousal), and *executive functions* (i.e., inhibitory control, working memory, attentional flexibility) for the purposes of goal-directed actions (Blair, 2016). It is associated with numerous child short and long-term academic and behavioural outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009), such as cooperative participation in classroom activities and sustained focus on tasks (Bierman, Nix, & Greenberg, 2008; Drake, Belsky, & Fearon, 2014), as well as reduced behavioural issues (Feng et al., 2008; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews, & Morrison, 2009). Vygotsky (1977) theorized that pretend play may be a tool of the mind which allows children to learn to master their own behaviour. Specifically, play functions to guide children in self-regulatory behaviour due to the inherent relationship that exists between the roles children play and the rules they need to follow when playing these roles (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). Children self-monitor in play as they act deliberately, motivated to abide by the confines of a given role (Vygotsky, 1978). To illustrate, when playing doctor, the child playing the patient must avoid the impulse to play with the stethoscope as it belongs the part of the doctor's repertoire for play and not his own (Bodrova et al., 2013).

Two processes of self-regulation should be considered: executive functions and emotional-regulation (Lillard et al., 2013). The literature does not consistently reveal strong evidence for pretend play's crucial (casual) role in developing executive function. However, a limited number of correlational studies support a relationship between executive function skills and pretend play (e.g., Carlson, White, & Davis-Unger, 2014). Study outcomes on the topic appear to be circumstantial. For example, significant positive effects between spontaneous pretend play and executive function skills have been shown in a study with high-impulsive children, whereas there was no effect with low-impulsive children (Elias & Berk, 2002). In a similarly designed study, no effect was found with a sample of four-year-old children from low-income backgrounds. The discrepant results were attributed to the themes of the children's pretending which were often aggressive or violent (e.g., robbery, killings and imprisonment) (Harris & Berk, 2003). More research is needed to investigate the benefits of play among

children from disadvantaged backgrounds and themes of violence in play (Bergen, 2013), in light of theories promoting play's role in regulating emotions (Erikson, 1977; Freud, 1966).

Despite theoretical support for play's role in emotional-regulation, studies on the topic are sparse. The only published training study found no immediate nor long-term effect of pretend play on teacher-rated emotion regulation (based on scores from the Emotion Regulation checklist), yet pretending and positive affect increased relative to controls (Moore & Russ, 2008). The possibility that teachers may not be able to detect changes in emotional-regulation ability should be considered (Lillard et al., 2013). Two studies suggested that solitary pretend play may help reduce anxiety (Barnett & Storm, 1981; Barnett, 1984). Barnett's (1984) experimental study examined pretending's impact on stress following parents' departure on the first day of preschool. The group of children ($n = 74$), were rated on the Palmar Sweat Index as not very anxious ($n=38$) and anxious ($n=36$). Participants were divided into eight conditions: (1) solitary free play; (2) free play with five other peers present; (3) solitary non-play (listening to a story about shrubs) and (4) solitary non-play (listening to a story about shrubs) with five other children. Solitary play alleviated anxiety more than social play. Further, playing with toys alleviated anxiety more than listening to the story for the high anxious children. However, alternative explanations need to be ruled out wherein the reduction in anxiety could be attributable to the restrictive control activity. Altogether, past studies conducted on the relationship between emotional regulation and play are consistent with all three of Smith's (2010) positions, yet insufficient to draw conclusions (Lillard et al., 2013).

Studies of the relationship between emotional regulation and other forms of play, such as rough-and-tumble play, further illustrate the potential benefits of play. Rough-and-tumble play involves exaggerated movements (e.g., kicking), high energy behaviours (e.g., chasing), positive affect or a play face (e.g., smiling) (Pellegrini, 2006). Based on their studies with rodents, Pellis, Pellis and Himmler (2014) asserted that this form of play may function to enhance "cortical regulation of emotional and cognitive processes—especially as they pertain to social behaviour, and this had the effect of modifying the cortical neural circuits important to such regulation" (p.85). Experimental studies conducted on rats deprived of play provide support for its importance in development. When deprived, harmful effects in the areas of emotional regulation, social interactions and externalizing behaviours are observed (e.g., da Silva et al., 1996; von Frijtag, 2002). These play studies made possible by modern neuroscience techniques help

demonstrate the importance of rough-and-tumble play, at least in rodent samples. Namely, rough-and-tumble play is an emotionally and physically challenging behaviour incorporating important skills (e.g., reading the emotional expression of playmates), which is hypothesized to have wide-reaching effects particularly in regards to emotional regulation and the related developmental areas of social competence and cognition in humans (Pellis, Pellis & Himmler, 2014).

Finally, adult interaction emerges as a potential underlying cause of positive effects from a number of play interventions (Lillard et al., 2013). Pretend play's usefulness may relate to the fact that it occurs in setting that may facilitate positive adult-child interaction (Paley, 2005; Smith et al., 1981). Aligning with the objectives of sociocultural theory, the research literature could benefit from a better understanding of the role and development of mentoring relationships in play and learning contexts.

2.2 Parenting

2.2.1 Parenting and child development.

Parenting matters, as seen in the abundant empirical evidence supporting the crucial role of the caregiving environment as an agent in the social, cognitive, and affective development of the child (Bornstein, Cote, Haynes, Hahn, & Park, 2010; McGillicuddy-Delisi, 1985; Pomerleau, Malcuit, & Sabatier, 1991). Several theories capture the significance of parenting in child development.

Ecological theory, through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) influential ecological model, emphasizes the importance of children's environments and their interactions with cultural members in their development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that every child grows up in the midst of interacting social systems with the family environment as a primary context. However, an ecological model has been criticized as inappropriate for research involving minority cultures due to the dominant social standards inherent in the models. As Canadian researchers Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, and Pearce (2012) have asserted "Ecological theory... privileges the childrearing practices, norms, and values of the dominant, White, middle-class people" (p.6).

The sociocultural approach emphasizes cultural variation or stress that individual development, and the broader cultural context, are inextricably linked and cannot be viewed in isolation (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). In his seminal theory of cognitive development (1978), Vygotsky is credited with extending the unit of analysis of cognitive

development from the individual to consider the child and his/her dynamic relation to cultural-historical contexts. In addition, Vygotsky (1978) proposed the notion of the ZPD, in which children learn to use the tools for thinking provided by culture through their interactions with more skilled partners. Through the process of participation in cultural activities in the ZPD, the child is transformed and he/she also contributes towards and shapes society (Vygotsky, 1978). To illustrate this process, parents make decisions regarding extracurricular activities or saving chores until toddlers are asleep, children contribute to the process by deciding (or not deciding) to play with a preferred partner, do chores, or eavesdrop on their parents. In addition, communities construct institutions that include or exclude children (Rogoff, 2003). Culture, therefore, is not a static entity that influences people, but rather formed by the efforts of people working together, using and adapting cultural tools provided by predecessors and creating new ones (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

Barbara Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural view of development draws on Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) foundational work. Development, according to Rogoff (2003), is conceptualized as a process of changing participation in cultural activities. These activities afford children the opportunity to interact meaningfully with others and constitute major sources of learning experiences. In deciding the nature of the activities, as well as the role of each participant, the more competent cultural members collaborate with children through guidance, a process termed *guided participation* (Rogoff, 1990). This process may involve "adults or children challenging, constraining or supporting children in the process of posing or solving problems—through material arrangements of children's activities and responsibilities as well as through interpersonal communication" (Rogoff, 1990, 18). The child observes and participates at a slightly higher level in these culturally-structured activities, thus contributing to his/her development (Rogoff, 1990).

The concept of guided participation broadens the view of the collaborative nature of learning to understand "the varied ways that children learn as they participate in and are guided by the values of practices of their cultural communities" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 284). *Guided* refers to the direction offered by cultural or social values, as well as social partners (Rogoff, 2008) while, *participation* may range from observation to hands-on activities (e.g., play, explicit instruction) (Rogoff, 2008). Although the idea of guided participation finds inspiration in the Vygotskian (1978) concept of the ZPD, Rogoff (2003) claims that Vygotsky overly focused on Western

notions of development, which may include that children ‘need’ time and resources to play (e.g., blocks, commercial toys) and cognitive stimulation from adults using cultural tools (e.g., play, language) and communication (e.g., explicit instructional interactions) (Brooker, 2017; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). However, in diverse communities, adults organize material arrangements of children’s activities and responsibilities in varied ways and communicate with children in a way which aligns with a coherent set of notions about child development (Brooker, 2017). For example, in a study comparing four cultural communities (i.e., Guatemala, India, America, Turkey), Göncü et al. (2000) found that Dhol-Ki-Patti (Indian) parents most often engaged children in playful teasing games (e.g., jokingly trying to frighten the child with a pretend growl), which contrasted with the parent-child play observed in the middle-class American sample, in which teasing was absent and pretend play as well as language games oriented around novel objects, such as labelling games (e.g., name the picture), were most frequent.

To frame analysis of the dynamic contexts and processes underlying human development, Rogoff (2008) proposed to examine development on three planes: personal, interpersonal, and cultural-institutional. As a leading researcher in cultural psychology, Rogoff’s contributions to the field include attempts to articulate a culture-sensitive theory of development, one that seeks to understand how child and culture are co-created (Rogoff et al., 1993). She seeks to understand patterns and variations of cultural practices that have their own coherence. These endeavors focusing on the cultural variation in learning processes and settings (e.g., learning through observation, cultural aspects of collaboration) address the deficit hypothesis in which non-Western practices are considerations deviations of the Western standard of optimal learning and development (Rogoff, 2003).

2.2.2 Parental beliefs.

Contextual theories including those of Vygotsky (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Rogoff (2003) emphasize the important role of parents in providing the earliest social context for child development. It is unsurprising, therefore, that researchers in the field of parenting are interested in identifying parental variation in terms of behaviour and analyzing the influence on child outcomes (Holden & Edwards, 1989). One research strategy to infer parental variation relies on studying parental beliefs in relation to children’s activities, such as play (e.g., Harkness et al., 2011; Rogoff, 1990, 2003).

For the purposes of this study, parental beliefs are defined as knowledge or ideas that are accepted as true by an individual or group (Sigel, 1985). Further, beliefs are a convenient frame of reference which “organize the world for individuals, enabling them to cope with everyday life without being overwhelmed by information and decision making demands” (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1995, p. 333). These frames of reference are thought to direct behaviours, including the organization of children’s daily activities (e.g., playdates, family dinners), living contexts (e.g., types of objects in home) and children’s daily routines and social interactions (e.g., conversations about manners) (e.g., McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1985; Palacios, Gonzalez & Moreno, 1992), and parental participation in such activities (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1992, 2006; Harkness et al., 2011). Parental beliefs are thus the framework which shapes parent-child relationship and instrumental sources of influence on the developing child (Grusec, Rudy, & Martini, 1997; Harkness & Super, 1996; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002).

There has been increasing recognition that parenting beliefs and behaviours vary according to cultural models (Goodnow, 1988; Light & Valsiner, 1992; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Goodnow (1996) asserted that parents adopt beliefs, such as specific beliefs about developmental milestones, how children develop, and customary childrearing practices ready-made from their individual culture. For example, a common childrearing practice in most societies is that of speaking to babies as interactive comprehending partners long before they are capable of producing speech. However, in some societies parents think it is nonsensical to converse in such a way with babies (Ochs, 1988). Parents’ cultural belief systems are also thought to encompass child-rearing and developmental goals (Rogoff, 2003). These goals are cultural norms and values specific to particular group in a society that function to provide optimal regulation of their social life (Goodnow, 2002). For example, European-American child-rearing goals may stress curiosity, creativity, virtuosity, and the ability to hold one’s own in a mixed social group (Haight et al., 1999).

However, it is important to note that parents’ personal belief systems are not direct replications of cultural norms, but rather individualized and flexible versions (Cheah & Chirkov, 2008; Harkness & Super, 2002). Cultural models have the potential to provide a blueprint for understanding, but do not preclude the examination of intracultural variation of cultural belief systems (Fasoli, 2014; Goodnow, 1988; Harkness & Super, 1995). Intracultural variation occurs when the conceptualizations of parents within the same cultural group vary from one another, but

similar trends may be observed given the influence of cultural values and norms (Harkness & Super, 1996). There are many complex converging sources of intracultural variation, such as parents' personal experiences. McGillicuddy-DeLisi and Sigel (1995) asserted that parental beliefs about development are constructed and modified on the basis of one's personal experiences as a parent. For example, play experiences as a child would subsequently affect the nature of one's beliefs about their own children's play as an adult (Sigel, Lisi, & Johnson, 1980; Haight, Parke & Black, 1997). For example, Haight et al. (1997) found that parents attached a variety of personal meanings to parent-child play. In particular, one father valued his participation in his child's pretend play as a way to encourage the development of faith; he stated, "You need a lot of being able to pretend to be able to think there is a God and a Christ."

An additional key source of intracultural variation is socioeconomic status (SES). SES is related to children's learning, child development, and health status (e.g., Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996) as the socioeconomic situation of a family impacts parents' child-rearing strategies (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Elder & Conger, 2000). Parental beliefs and expectations may be part of a complex set of mediators connecting differences in SES, stimulating opportunities for the child, and child outcomes. There is some evidence that low-income families may provide less cognitive stimulation in the home environment, which by extension, hinders children's school readiness potential (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). This may be related to self-efficacy, wherein parents from lower-SES backgrounds are less likely to believe that they have an impact on their child's outcomes than higher-SES parents (Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995).

As in the case of acculturation, cultural belief systems may be revised as parents encounter child rearing models that are discrepant or in opposition to their own internal working models about parental input that might promote development (Cote & Bornstein, 2005). Cheah and Chirkov's (2008) investigation of the childrearing goals and values of urban-dwelling Canadian mothers of Aboriginal ($n = 50$) and European descent ($n = 51$) illustrated the complex effects of acculturation on belief-systems. The findings revealed that the individual goals of mothers of Aboriginal heritage for parenting and outcomes for their children were similar to those of European heritage, although they acknowledged their cultural values. However, unlike European Canadian mothers, mothers of Aboriginals heritage placed greater value on education in order to avoid negative stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples. In addition, mothers of Aboriginal

heritage were more likely to value their cultural and spiritual beliefs, as well as more likely to experience tension between their personal goals for parenting and their perceptions of culturally-sanctioned goals. The Aboriginal mothers may have revised their belief systems to acculturate and adapt to a predominantly European Canadian environment (Cheah & Chirkov, 2008).

The developmental literature has attempted to account for parental beliefs related to various childrearing domains (e.g., infant health, literacy development) (e.g., Moscardino, Nwobu, & Axia, 2006; Torr, 2008). Play is one universal domain of childrearing which provides a basis on which one can study parental beliefs and behaviours (Harkness & Super, 1996).

Parental Beliefs of Play. Parental beliefs of children's play have been examined within various demographics: North America (e.g., Fasoli, 2014; Fisher et al., 2008; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004, 2008), Asia (e.g., Lin & Yawkey, 2013), Europe (e.g., Ivrendi & Isikoglu, 2010; Pirpir, Er, Koçak, 2009), and Africa (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1986). In general, these findings have suggested that parental beliefs about the role of play in learning and development vary across these demographics and have been found to relate to community practices and economic circumstances (e.g., Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Smith, Stagnitti, Lewis, & Pépin, 2015). To illustrate, in communities geared to preparing children for schooling, activities such as play or didactic lessons may be prevalent (Rogoff, 2003; Tudge et al., 2006), while in other communities where schooling is not as important, economic activities (e.g., running errands, buying bread) may predominate (e.g., Farver, 1999; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015).

Research findings have indicated that there is cultural variance in perceptions of play. In *middle-class* Western cultures, parents generally posit a connection between children's play and various domains of development, such as cognitive, language and intrapersonal domains (e.g., Colliver, 2016; Fisher et al., 2008; Haight et al., 1997). In addition, among parents in the United States, those of European-American and Latino backgrounds generally see play as important context for learning (Farver & Wimbari, 1995; Fasoli, 2014). Fasoli (2014) found ethnic differences between Latino and European-American parents in terms of how they believed children learned in a museum-setting. Euro-American parents most commonly (85%) attributed learning to the child's self-directed and independent engagement in activities, whereas Latino parents were less likely to give such responses (33%) and instead referenced learning as engagement and interaction with parents (54%) and peers (30%).

Research on parents' perceptions of play in Canada specifically is limited. Lehrer and Petrakos (2011) investigated the beliefs of an overall well-educated sample of Eastern Canadian parents through open-ended questionnaire items. The parent participants ($n=56$) of Grade 1 children (49% of children reported to be of European descent, followed by 13% of mixed heritage) valued play for their child's development and education, for building relationships and self-esteem, for processing emotional experiences, and for fun. The findings thus appear to align with the general findings from extant research on other Western groups. Interestingly, while parents perceived play as an essential childhood activity, some nonetheless disapproved of certain play behaviours, specifically rough-and-tumble play, due to fear of physical harm or perceptions of the aggressive nature of the activity. This is consistent with Canella's (1997) theoretical stance that adults attempt to regulate and control children's play through suppression or encouragement of specific play behaviours.

It has been argued that middle-class conceptualizations of play and development have been privileged in play and early childhood education (ECE) discourse wherein the European American child is seen as the standard (Fleer, 2009; Gaskins & Miller, 2009). In non-Western parenting cultures, such as Mexican (Farver & Howes, 1993), Mayan (Gaskins, 1999), and Indonesian cultures (Farver & Wimbariti, 1995), notions of play as a superfluous activity lacking value or an activity meant merely for fun contrast with dominant Western notions of play. In fact, in certain cultures (e.g., Mexican) children's participation in work-related activities may be deemed more important than participation in play activities (e.g., preparing food) (Farver & Howes, 1993; Tamis-LeMonda, Uzgiris, & Bornstein, 2002).

Investigations of the beliefs of minority parenting groups of diverse cultural backgrounds residing in Western contexts add to a more inclusive account of play. For example, in the American context, Parmar, Harkness and Super (2004) revealed cultural differences in their investigation of Asian American and European American parenting groups. European American parents rated play as significantly more important overall and especially important for cognitive development (e.g., exploring a topic in depth). On the other hand, Asian American parents rated play as significantly more important for social development (e.g., sharing, respecting, and cooperating with others) and physical development (e.g. circulation and respiration). In the Canadian context, studies examining parental beliefs of play are sparse and especially lacking are studies involving minority cultural groups. A sole published study, conducted by Gillis (1991),

examines the play perceptions of Canadian parents of Indigenous backgrounds. Parents of 3-5-year-old children residing in three First Nations communities in Ontario (remote, urban, & semi-remote) were interviewed about their beliefs of the role of play in early childhood education. Findings revealed that the parents indicated overall strong support for play. Their beliefs reflected play as beneficial in areas such as socialization (e.g., learning manners and sharing), emotional development (e.g., control tempers, deal with hurt and pain from personal loss), motor skills (e.g., riding a tricycle), keeping the child occupied (i.e., so that parent have a break and child can stay away from other activities parents find inappropriate such as throwing rocks), cognitive development (e.g., problem-solving in social or educational contexts, learning what is real and what is not, using tools) and learning pre-academic skills (e.g., learning to count). However, a single study cannot be used to generalize to all Aboriginal populations, especially considering the great deal of diversity within Canadian Aboriginal communities (Statistics Canada, 2011). An Indigenous model of play and early development is lacking, which hinders theoretical development and empirical investigation on the topic of play in the lives of children of Indigenous children (Dender & Stagnitti, 2015; Roopnarine, 2012).

While the study of parental beliefs across cultural groups is important, analysis of the complex and interrelated set of variables within each community, including individual (e.g., gender) and situational factors (e.g., SES indicators) is necessary to unmask the diversity of assumptions parents hold about play (Fasoli, 2014; Goodnow, 1988; Harkness & Super, 1996; Rogoff et al., 1993). For example, Manz and Bracaliello's (2016) findings indicated a significant positive association between educational attainment and parents' endorsement of play, as measured by the English version of their parental beliefs of play scale. The finding is consistent with additional studies reporting a positive association between parental education and play support (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; LaForett & Mendez, 2016). While these studies suggested that parents with higher levels of education tend to support play more so than parents with lower levels of education, the findings are premature in light of the few investigations conducted on the topic (Manz & Bracaliello, 2016). Further, studies have accounted for gender differences relating to play beliefs and practices in studies, although the evidence is not entirely conclusive (Bornstein, Haynes, O'Reilly, & Painter, 1996; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Gleason, 2005; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; Roopnarine & Jin, 2012).

Parents' perceptions of play are an important area of investigation as they are thought to structure cognitive and social activities for children (e.g., Haight et al., 1997; Harkness & Super, 1992; Roopnarine & Jin, 2012). In other words, positive parenting perceptions of play may increase the amount of childhood playtime (Fisher et al., 2008; Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2006; Lillard, 2011). For example, Fisher et al. (2008) found that Anglo-American parents who held strong play-learning beliefs (i.e., those who identified activities as highly playful with strong academic learning value) reported that their children engaged in a higher frequency of these play behaviors. They may also serve to shape parent-child interactions in play. Several studies demonstrated that the endorsement of the significance of certain play forms for child development determines the extent to which parents will provide support and participate in this form of play (e.g., Haight et al., 1997; Jacob, 2012; Manz & Bracaliello, 2016). For example, Caucasian American middle-class parents identified the cognitive benefits of pretend play as one of their foremost motivations for playing with their children (Harkness & Super, 1992). However, this relationship is complex and needs to be considered within a broader cultural context of socialization values and practices (e.g., gender roles). For example, Haight et al. (1997) found that American middle-class fathers and mothers who both pretended relatively frequently differed in their play beliefs. Fathers viewed pretend play as enjoyable, whereas mothers viewed pretend play as a developmentally significant activity and their own participation as key. The belief-behaviour link for mothers appears to be stronger and it is not yet clear, based on past studies, which kind of parental beliefs result in increased play behaviours (e.g., Fasoli, 2014; Haight et al., 1997).

It is vitally important to note that the actual means of parental support in play varies considerably and appropriately across cultures and economic backgrounds (Farver & Howes, 1993; Göncü, Jain, & Tuermer, 2006; Rogoff, 1990; Lancy, 2007). Empirical studies have revealed that parental involvement may be atypical in some non-Western cultures (Rogoff et al., 1993; Rogoff, 1981) and exceptionally, in one Western culture (i.e., Italian) (New, 1994). In fact, in certain cultures (e.g., Latino), siblings and peers may replace parents as playmates (Farver & Howes, 1993; Gaskins, 2013; Göncü et al., 2000) and even interact with their younger siblings as a mature parent might (Farver & Wimbarti, 1995). Several explanations exist for the absence of parent-child play. One salient consideration is the economic structure of the community, which may cause workload constraints (e.g., Göncü et al., 2000; Martini, 1994). Another relates to

parental beliefs, particularly the belief that parent-child interactions interfere with children's in-born character and sense of autonomy (Rogoff, 2003; Sorenson, 1976) and that play occurs naturally, without intervention (New, 1994).

Lancy (2007) argued that parent-child play may be far from universal even among Western parenting groups. Studies indicating that mother-child play is largely absent in lower-class households (Heath, 1990; Ward, 1971) provide support for this claim. A more recent study (Smith et al., 2015) sheds light on the potential effects of intergenerational poverty on parental beliefs regarding their role in children's play. The researchers interviewed an ethnically-diverse group of Australian mothers and found that the mothers did not see themselves as suitable play partners for their children despite having observed various positive benefits of parent-child play. Play was perceived as the work of children, not necessitating the involvement of parents. Parents nonetheless valued play for developmental purposes. The findings align with Lancy's (2007) assertion that mother-child play seems to be a product of a distinct middle-class cultural milieu in which parents have relatively high levels of schooling. It is important to note that additional studies are warranted to fully understand the dynamics of parent-child play, given the focus appears to be restricted (e.g., to either parenting groups in undeveloped countries with little formal education or those in developed countries with high levels of education). Roopnarine and Davidson (2015) asserted in their review that "parent-child play as a medium for upward educational mobility may be gaining appeal and traction in newly developed and developing economies" (p. 237). Their assertion is based on studies using field observations and estimates obtained through interviews and self-reports. For example, Bornstein and Putnick (2012) demonstrated in their large-scale study—127, 000 families in 28 developing countries—that parents worldwide spend considerable time playing and engaging with their children. In fact, the researchers found that across all countries, taking children outdoors and playing were the most predominant activities.

In middle-class societies, research has demonstrated that parents tend to value play and correspondingly consider themselves appropriate play partners (e.g., Göncü et al., 2000; Haight & Miller, 1993). They may involve themselves in children's play directly (e.g., teaching) or indirectly (e.g., providing time, space, resources) (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). Through effectively interacting with children, parents have the potential to promote problem solving skills, build imagination, develop language, and social competence (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, &

Jones, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). Parent-child interactions, whether social (e.g., turn-taking) or didactic (teaching), can result in important benefits for the child (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002). Benefits may be apparent in the social domain (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002). For example, mother-child play in the early years has been found to build a foundation for peer competence (e.g., social connectedness) in the school years (Hebert-Myers, Guttentag, Swank, Smith, & Landry, 2006; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002), which may demonstrate that a child's ability to engage with peers in a task requiring sustained interaction and joint attention has its roots in successful, early mother-child interactions (Hebert-Myers et al., 2006). There may be also important cognitive benefits (e.g., representational thinking, problem-solving skills) related to mother-child play (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2002). Several studies have demonstrated that mother-child play is more complex, sophisticated, frequent, sustained than solitary play (e.g., Fiese, 1990; Haight & Miller, 1992; Smilansky, 1990).

The meanings attached to beliefs about play as well as involvement in play activities are not arbitrary. Rather, meanings are driven by community goals for children's development (Rogoff, 2003) with apparent differences in value systems (e.g., Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995; Haight, 1999; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004). For example, in regards to values, observations of middle-class Asian American mothers suggested that they participate in pretend play with their children as a means to promote appropriate social interactions and awareness of social relations (Haight, 1999; Haight et al., 1999). According to Lancy (2007), the common theme which motivates mothers in modern middle-class societies to engage in high levels of mother-child play and verbal interaction relate to their childrearing goals of educational success and eventual participation in the information economy. Conversely, in societies where social class is equated with destiny and children are not seen as having such futures, mothers may not spend time playing with their children (Kusserow, 2004; Lareau, 2003; Martini, 1995; Morelli, Rogoff, & Angelillo, 2003). The degree of parental involvement in play and other out of context activities may be appropriate in these societies as development is expected to occur in contexts other than play (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006) through participation in guided activities with adults (Göncü et al., 2000; Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003).

As evidenced in the literature, parents hold a range of cultural meanings and assumptions cross-culturally regarding children's play and the parenting role in play. In highlighting

variations and regularities among parents, sociocultural discourse seeks to unravel how play is discussed, shaped and privileged within differing cultural contexts (Fleer, 2009).

2.3 Summary of Literature Review

Play should be taken seriously as an intellectual construct (Bergen, 2013). Specifically, the positive contributions of play in children's lives have received support empirical and theoretical support (e.g., Elias & Berk, 2002; Piaget, 1962; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Roggman et al., 2004), although more empirical research is necessary to appreciate its complex role in development (Lillard et al., 2013). Research on parental beliefs towards play has not been explored in detail and research including Canadian parents is greatly wanting. An exploration of beliefs among parents in Saskatchewan is warranted in order to understand the important social, emotional, scientific, and cultural meanings embedded in their beliefs about play.

3 Methodology

The methodology for this study is outlined in the following chapter. First, a description of the nature of the study is provided and the research questions are defined. The research design is then presented, including the theoretical approach for the study. In the following section, participants, recruitment and sampling are outlined, followed by the procedures involved in the study. Measures are described next, including the demographic questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. The chapter closes with a description of the data analysis.

3.1 Overview

On the theoretical grounds that parental beliefs influence parental actions (e.g., parental teaching practices, parental participation in play) (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1985; Manz & Bracaliello, 2016) and child behaviours (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008) it is important to develop self-report instruments to assess parents' beliefs of play. In response to the lack of psychometrically strong scales of parental play-related beliefs in the literature, the NowPlay research team at the University of Saskatchewan aims to adapt and field test a self-report instrument or scale to assess parental views of play. The scale will be designed to assess parental play beliefs and provide information meaningful to the study of children's play within an understudied sample of Western Canadian parents. As an initial step in the process of scale development, focus groups with a socio-demographically mixed group of parents were conducted. The purpose of the focus groups was two-fold: 1) to obtain qualitative data related to the developmental perspectives and cultural assumptions of play among parents within the specific sociodemographic context of Western Canada; and 2) to elicit a discussion of the relevancy of existing scales of parental beliefs. The current study uses secondary data from the first set of focus group interviews that centered on exploring parental perceptions of play. These focus groups were organized and run by a member of the research team, with the student researcher being tasked to transcribe, review, and discuss the data from these preliminary focus groups as part of her thesis research study. Data from both sets of focus groups exploring parental perceptions of play and the relevancy of existing scales of parental beliefs will be used to adapt the existing surveys to the Western Canadian context to improve cultural sensitivity of scales. Approval from the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board for the current study and graduate student participation in the study was received in May 2017 (BEH# 17-65).

3.1.1 Research questions.

The following research questions were explored:

1. What are the beliefs about the value of play and its influence on development among a Western Canadian group of parents?
 - a) If parents do value play experiences for development, which experiences do they value and why?

3.2 Research Design

The research employs a qualitative design inspired by the basic interpretative approach. The basic interpretative approach aligns well with a study whose purpose is to identify unfamiliar and concealed meanings, attitudes, values, beliefs and knowledge of diverse groups of parents (Merriam, 2009). In this study, meanings are mediated through the researcher as an instrument and the strategy is inductive, in which themes are identified at an interpretative level (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam, 2009). The focus group interview provides the methodological basis for a thematic analysis in order to answer the research question. The focus group format aligns with a constructionist perspective, in which meanings and experiences are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inherent within individuals (Burr, 1995).

Interviews have been selected as a basic qualitative research strategy to elucidate parental beliefs and attitudes (Holden & Edwards, 1989). A particular strength is the flexibility of the conversational style of administration and potential for follow-up questions. Interviews can also be conducted in a variety of settings, including individually or in the group context. Focus groups, a method for understanding parental views of play through a group interview, have advantages over individual interviews, which are more time-consuming and costly with discussion typically limited by the skill of the interviewer (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Krueger and Casey (2014) described a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (p. 6). Participants share their ideas and perceptions in a facilitated group discussion, wherein their responses mutually influence each other. Focus groups can be used for a broad range of purposes. Of relevance to this study, focus groups can be used to pretest instruments, adapt survey items, and gain insights into a particular population to aid in future investigation (Carey, 1994). In parenting research specifically, focus group interviews used in conjunction with

observation or questionnaires are recommended to allow for clarification and expansion upon the meaning and importance of parenting practices (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2003; Gaskins, 1994). In this initial set of focus groups interview, participants were invited to provide extensive narratives of the phenomenon not captured solely through quantitative research (Carey, 1994).

In the study of culture, the inclusion of focus group interviews helps prevent psychologists from expert-driven procedures (Gaskins, 1994) resulting in culturally-insensitive and culturally-biased research with the target population (Rogler, 1999). Gaskins (1994) argued for an integrated approach in parenting and socialization research, as in the larger NowPlay project, which combines the merits of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure cultural validity. For example, the interpretive approach allows for hypothesis-generating. A preliminary step in this study was to generate hypotheses about how adults regard the development of children as opposed to testing a hypothesis grounded within the cultural assumptions of the researcher (Levine, 1969). Next, the interpretive approach allows for culturally-informed language (Lucy, 1992). In this study, the language used for description and comparison was derived inductively from the interviews (e.g., “How is play defined in your culture?”). Thirdly, the interpretative understanding of cultural beliefs of play acquired from the focus group interviews will serve to influence the design and implementation of the quantitative portion of the larger project (Gaskins, 1994). Specifically, it will help facilitate and guide writing scale items to develop culturally-unbiased measures that will elicit pertinent information from the target population (Gaskins, 1994).

3.2.1 Participants.

The target group for this study was parents and/or caregivers. The eligibility for participation required the parent/caregiver to be a resident of Saskatchewan and currently have at least one child under their care attending daycare, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten or in grades 1 – 4 at the elementary level in Saskatchewan. This demographic was chosen for four reasons, the first being that at two years of age children begin to engage in more complex play sequences and at ten generally engage in less pretend play and gravitate toward sports and other forms of organized games where rules guide actual behaviours (Garner & Bergen, 2015; Manning, 2006; Piaget, 1962). Secondly, children, especially ten to twelve-year-old children, begin to individuate from their parents and teachers and shift allegiance to peers, with whom they play. The play behaviours between these age groups are thus qualitatively different (Manning, 2006). Thirdly,

the scales designed to survey parental beliefs were developed for infants and preschool-aged children (Fisher et al., 2008; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004) and elementary-aged children (Morris, 2013). Finally, the province of residence is important to the study considering the focus on the specific context of the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

3.2.2 Sampling.

The sampling method employed in the present study was purposeful sampling, a nonprobability sampling strategy (Patton, 2002; Wengraf, 2001). Purposive sampling is used when participants are selected based on their attributes, such as being an informant who knows the information required and is willing to participate and reflect on the phenomena of interest (Merriam, 2009). Purposeful sampling, specifically, the maximum variation type, involves identifying and seeking out those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study (Wengraf, 2001). Specifically, participants representing the range of culturally diverse groups residing in Saskatchewan was sought. This type of sampling helps assure the depiction of the “core experiences and central, shared dimensions of the phenomenon” of play-related beliefs from the narratives expressed in these groups (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Purposeful sampling also satisfies the saturation criterion (Creswell, 1998). The sampling size will rely on saturation or adding new participants to the point of diminishing returns, when no new information is revealed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3.2.3 Recruitment.

The recruitment process began with the identification of community centres and public institutions (e.g., schools, daycares, recreation services) which run programming for Saskatchewan families. The gatekeepers or managers of these centres or organizations were consulted and formal approval to recruit was sought. A recruitment announcement appeared on an online bulletin website of a post-secondary university (see Appendix B). A total of fourteen participants took part in the study. An exception was made for a participant to participate who did not meet the criteria. The children of one participant, Penelope, were not attending daycare at the time of the study due to the family’s financial constraints. Penelope was nonetheless included in the study given her eldest was set to attend kindergarten in the upcoming school year. Formal consent was sought from the fourteen parents participating in the study. A member of the research team arranged interview dates and times based on the participants' shared availabilities. Forms were sent to the participants so they could read, sign, copy, and return them prior to the

date of the focus group interview. Upon meeting on the focus group interview date, participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns regarding the signed documents.

3.2.4 Procedure.

Four focus groups composed of two to five parents participated in the study (n=14). These preliminary focus group sessions were held in a mutually agreed upon location in the community and ranged between 45 and 90 minutes in length. A member of the research team facilitated each discussion and audio and video recorded the session. The student researcher transcribed verbatim all discussions during the focus groups.

Prior to the start of the session, each focus group member independently completed a demographic form and a consent form (see Appendix C & D). The demographic form, combined with the survey results, yields the family information necessary to conduct quantitative analyses for the purposes of the larger project. Before discussing the topic, the groups discussed confidentiality, including the limits to confidentiality present in a focus group. The facilitator also reviewed the study's objectives and invited the group to ask any questions concerning participation in the study. Participants were informed of their chance to win a gift certificate from the draw at the conclusion of the group.

Parents' perceptions of play were gathered through a semi-structured focus group interview. Following the first focus group, the member of the research team conducting the focus groups asked the participants to comment on their perceptions of the questions (e.g., perceived understanding, relevance). The participants did not suggest any changes, however the first researcher restructured the questions in subsequent focus group interviews to account for the overlaps in the questions she noticed in the first focus group interview. For example, the first researcher ensured that she did not ask too many questions at once to allow participants to focus on a particular topic (e.g., developmental value of play). Each of the focus group interviews were transcribed and reviewed by the student researcher to determine emerging themes through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3 Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

The semi-structured focus group interview included several open-ended questions in order to grasp the complexity of the meanings parents place on children's play from within their own communities' goals and practices (Rogoff, 2003). At each session, participants were asked a set of questions concerning cultural and personal definitions of play (e.g., "How is play defined

in your culture?”), types of activities considered play (e.g., “What are some activities that you would consider play?”), the developmental value of play (e.g., “Do you think play is important in your child’s development? Why?”), types of play and learning activities in the home and educational settings (e.g., “Is child allowed play time at home?”). As suggested by Rogoff (1990), participants were asked about parental involvement in play (e.g., “Do you play with your child?”) given the potentially significant role of the parent-child relationship in shaping the amount of parental play with children. Follow-up questions were asked depending upon the responses of the participants (e.g., “Is this a Canadian family you are talking about?”). See Appendix E for the full list of questions. Participants were asked the same questions in the same order for consistency of coding to simplify the process of searching for patterns of answers and to ensure focus on specific characteristics of the data (Morse & Richards, 2002).

The prevailing theoretical perspective in the study is that parental beliefs about play are not universal and a cultural approach is necessary to understand beliefs (e.g., Bornstein, 2012; Rogoff, 2003). Consistent with this perspective, beliefs about play are formed through interaction in routine activities with others and through the historical and cultural settings of the participants (Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, the questions focused on the specific contexts in which Saskatchewan parents live and work in order to understand the social and cultural settings of the participants. It follows that, epistemologically-speaking, the researcher will acquire knowledge through iterative construction of the participants’ socially-constructed meanings.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were identified inductively with data analysis occurring over six phases, according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines: (1) Familiarizing yourself with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; (6) Producing the report.

The *first phase* consisted of listening to the audio recordings and transcribing the interviews. Each transcript was then read in its entirety for general understanding and impressions; a second reading served to generate preliminary notes and code words for seemingly significant key concepts. The *second phase* involved generation of initial codes from the data. Creating codes (summary terms) from the transcripts was completed to create semantic (obvious) codes stated by the participants. Certain initial codes were repeated and confirmed as

similar ideas emerged within and across interviews. The *third phase* of coding involves the sorting of codes and generation of themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The semantic codes were grouped into a few broader categories that represented the main concepts of the codes. The *fourth phase* involves refinement of themes gathered from the third phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this point, a re-reading and re-coding of the data was performed to examine coherency of coded data extracts to the themes as well as the validity of the themes in relation to the entire data set. Any codes that were not triangulated between two or more parents were removed. A graphic organizer was created and organized, themes and sub-themes were developed, and codes that were not deemed relevant to the themes were removed. Participant quotes were then selected and added to each theme in order to help represent and support the main ideas from the transcripts. The *fifth phase* involves defining and refining the themes which will be presented for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Included in this phase was a detailed analysis of each theme and its relation to the research question. Using the new, broad categories of the codes, themes and sub-themes were developed, and codes that were not deemed relevant to the themes were removed. Participant quotes were then selected and added to each theme in order to help represented and support the main ideas from the transcripts. The quotes were later narrowed down to only the most powerful and meaningful quotes to ensure accurate representation of the themes, and more importantly the participants and their experiences. Finally, the *sixth phase* involves using the worked-out themes from the former phase to compose an analytic narrative within and across themes.

3.5 Evaluation Criteria And Trustworthiness

The issues concerning validity and reliability of the current study are similar to those of all qualitative research, and emphasize establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This qualitative study meets Lincoln and Guba's (2013) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability.

Credibility refers to establishing confidence in the findings and interpretation of a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The criterion was achieved through member checking and peer checking (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). A summary of the interview highlighting key points were sent back to participants for member checking as it is the most critical technique used for ascertaining credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Peer checking was then carried out through discussion of initial themes between the first researcher and the primary investigator of the

NowPlay project. Transferability refers to the applicability of the findings in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Thick description of the findings, combined with ample description of the research context, were used as techniques to ensure transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Dependability refers to the extent to which the findings and interpretations are the outcomes of a consistent, dependable process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Dependability was achieved through a pilot focus group in which feedback on the focus group interview questions was elicited to determine their relevancy and perceived understanding, in addition to explicit descriptions of the research design and implementation, the operational detail of data gathering, and a reflective analysis of the project (Shenton, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

In the present study, my role as a researcher consisted of that of both a cultural commentator and cultural member, which requires the identification of my own assumptions as to not let them dictate the research (Clarke & Braun, 2013). My experiences in schools, government, and community organizations working with and supporting children and their families helped me approach the research with understanding, sensitivity and respect for the participants and their experiences. These experiences also contribute to my biases, which are inevitably present in qualitative research and render objectivity impossible (Merriam, 2009). I therefore sought to ensure a level of conformability in the findings. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are a result of a dependable process of inquiry as well as data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This criterion was addressed primarily through the inductive identification of themes. In other words, themes were strongly linked to data. As such, the data is representative of the participants' experiences and views, as opposed to the researcher's preferences and biases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

There were two principle ethical concerns within this study. The first ethical concern related to addressing any vulnerability the participants may feel when disclosing certain beliefs or home practices. The research team thus ensured care and attention to the participants' emotional and psychological state at all stages of the research. This was demonstrated in several ways; close attention was paid to attaining consent and maintaining confidentiality. Further, the focus group interviewer disclosed her cultural background, acknowledged diversity of beliefs, and shared her beliefs openly and sensitively in each of the interviews. While the focus group interview questions were predetermined, the interviewer adapted ways of questioning and

interpreting responses to align with the participants' perspective as per the derived ethic approach (Rogoff, 2003).

The second principle ethical concern related to rapport-building. Given the complex and emotional nature of the interview process, the focus group interviewer's qualifications were assured. A member of the research team was selected based on her research experience and skills as well as familiarity with the area of play research and the NowPlay project. Prior to the focus groups, the focus group interviewer directly contacted via email and/or phone the participants to build rapport, to provide information about the study and to set a time and date for the interview. During the focus groups interviews, the focus group interviewer exercised careful attention to confidentiality, respect, and sensitivity. Following the focus groups interviews, the focus group interviewer assured the participants that they may contact the researcher to access the study for their interest and/or to raise concerns.

4 Results

In this chapter, the participants are first introduced in terms of cultural background and family characteristics, followed by a thematic description of their perceptions and experiences related to children's play. As a measure of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the participants and their children. The participants' quotes were edited as necessary to remove or alter confidential identifying information (e.g., individual names of people). In addition, repetitive words or statements (i.e., umm, you know, like) were removed to increase clarity.

4.1 Participant Characteristics

A total of 14 participants (12 females and two males), varying in cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, levels of education, and occupations, participated in the current study. All of the participants currently resided in an urban centre in the province of Saskatchewan. Children of these families attended or were set to attend local educational institutions. Ten participants identified their cultural background as Canadian, of which nine were mothers. Four participants self-identified with backgrounds other than Canadian, including two Nigerian mothers, one of whom also identified as Muslim, one Jamaican mother, and one Mexican father.

It is important to note that participants' identified cultural background (e.g., 'Canadian', 'Muslim') were reported in this study. However, the intent was not to reduce the differences between communities to a single variable and establish causality (Rogoff, 2003). Rather, the pattern of aspects of the organization of each community was considered (e.g., family size, economic resources, religious affiliation). For example, the term *middle class* is one such pattern, in which one or more parents work out of the home and engage in family beliefs, values, practices which often accompany extensive schooling, middle-class occupations, and income (Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). The majority of participants in this study qualified as middle-class based on the family information they provided during the interviews (i.e., occupation, schooling).

The first focus group interview was comprised of four participants: Janelle, Erin, Elizabeth, and Annie. Janelle was a married primary caregiver with two biological children. At the time of the interview, her daughter was five years of age and her son was seven years of age. She identified culturally as Canadian and English and reported that she grew up on an acreage. The second participant was Erin, a married primary caregiver of one biological daughter, five years of age, and one biological son, eight years of age, who has a developmental disorder. The

third participant, Elizabeth, was a married primary caregiver of two biological sons. The eldest was three years of age and the youngest was eight months at the time of the interview. She self-identified as coming from a Nigerian background, however her children were born in Canada and not “into Nigerian culture”. The final participant in the first focus group interview was Annie, who identified her family’s background as Ukrainian. She and her husband were the primary caregivers to a boy, three years of age, at the time of the interview.

The second focus group interview was comprised of five participants: Martin, Penelope, Vanessa, Bethany, and Vivian. Martin identified as coming from a Mexican cultural background, having emigrated to Canada with his wife (from Columbia). They were the primary caregivers of one biological child, a boy two years of age at the time of the interview. The second participant, Penelope, self-identified as Nigerian Muslim. She and her husband were the primary caregivers of three biological children, one girl and two boys. At the time of the interview, the children were ages six, three, and one years of age respectively. The third participant, Vanessa, was a married primary caregiver of two biological sons, who were five and seven years of age at the time of the interview. She identified as being from a Canadian farming background, having grown up in rural Saskatchewan. The fourth participant, Bethany, identified as Canadian. She was married and a primary caregiver to an eight-year-old son and a five-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Finally, Vivian identified culturally as Jamaican. She was a married primary caregiver to her biological son who was nine years of age at the time of the interview.

A married couple, Olivia and Ethan, comprised the third focus group interview. Olivia and Ethan were the primary caregivers of their biological sons, aged two and four years at the time of the interview. They both self-identified as Canadian and grew up in an urban centre in Saskatchewan; Ethan added that he spent summers at the family farm.

The final focus group interview was comprised of three participants: Katrina, Debra, and Evelyn. Katrina was the biological mother and primary caregiver of two boys, aged nine and fourteen years at the time of the interview. She reported her cultural background as Canadian. She was also married and reported that her husband was from Europe, although the children were born and raised in Canada and did not identify as bicultural European-Canadian. Debra identified as Canadian (“third or fourth generation Canadian, Anglo-Saxon”) and added that she has lived and worked outside of Canada in developing nations. She was married and her husband was from South America. She was the primary caregiver of two biological children, one daughter, four

years of age, and one son, fourteen years of age, whom she described as bicultural and bilingual. The final participant, Evelyn, reported her family's cultural background as Canadian. She was a single primary caregiver to one daughter, who was eight-years-old at the time of the interview. She described her ex-husband's cultural background as Métis.

The participants' experiences and perspectives related to children's play were explored through semi-structured focus group interviews. Participants' narratives revealed four major themes: (1) The Nature of Play: Dominant, Divergent, and Diverse Conceptualizations ; (2) The Value of Play: Developmental Benefit in Six Key Areas; (3) The Decline of Play: Constraints to Play Opportunities; (4) The Agenda for Play: Activities Supporting Learning and Achievement. All participants discussed different aspects of each of the major themes. These themes are discussed and linked together using meaningful participant quotes.

4.2 Theme 1 The Nature of Play: Dominant, Divergent, and Diverse Conceptualizations

The focus group participants discussed their conceptualizations of play, which included definitions of play linked to the specific activities. First and foremost, the participants perceived play as a natural activity characterizing childhood. For example, Katrina reflected: "It's just natural; it's where they are in their development. It's having fun and playing", while Elizabeth commented on play as a childhood activity, sharing: "There will be a time where they come to their lesson and OK, no more play, and then they get serious." She added, "Play is really important in a kid's life. Let 'em just be kids." Further, participants alluded to its voluntary nature. For example, Martin shared: "If they try it and they enjoy it and they want to do it on their own eventually, then it becomes a voluntary thing and then it becomes play", while Erin similarly stated: "[P]lay is internally motivated. There's a drive, an intense focus to achieve something that you personally want to do."

The participants unanimously associated diverse forms of play with actions such as learning and exploring. For example, Penelope shared: "I see play to be fun, at the same time, when you're having fun, you learn from it", while Elizabeth asserted, "It's the only way they will actually learn anything." Janelle added the element of discovery: "[M]aybe you could associate play as times when you learn and discover." Annie observed her son exploring in play when she said that: "It's cool to getting to watch him explore his world and develop those kind of skills." Debra and Evelyn focussed on a definition of play as exploring the means rather than the ends.

Debra reflected: “If I think about play, the variable is not set right? ... You don’t know what’s coming next, it’s something that’s unexpected”, while Evelyn shared: “I know when she’s successfully playing when I don’t hear from her for quite awhile, because she’s into something and she’s not worried about how to do it or whether it works.”

The vast majority of participants (11) defined play with terms denoting pleasure (e.g., fun, relaxing, enjoyable, free). For example, Evelyn discussed the inherent rewards of play, stating: “Even if it’s that hitting your brother with a rope evokes an interesting response to see what will happen, then you’re doing things that feel fun and are inherently rewarding....” Penelope described play in terms of freedom and happiness: “You’re happy with what you’re doing. That means you’re catching fun. It’s not a kind of restricted thing. You’re free. So, you feel relaxed.” Further, Vivian shared, “My perspective of play is fun activities that just allow you to relax. Just to enjoy being together as a family or even by yourself.”

Olivia, Ethan, Erin, and Martin, however, shared a definition of play transcending that of mere pleasure; notably when referencing play’s contribution in socio-emotional problem-solving. For example, according to Erin, “[P]lay isn’t this esoteric, wonderful, always good thing. Bad things happen in play and it’s teaching them life skills that they don’t necessarily need to learn in a structured way”, while Martin stated: “[T]he reason you’re doing that activity is because overall you’re having enjoyment of that and those up and downs are probably the part that.”

In terms of unstructured activities, participants overall concurred in their identification of unstructured activities as play and considerably overlapped in the various cited forms of unstructured play. Participants generally defined “unstructured” as the absence of external structure imposed by an activity or adult (i.e., expectations, parameters), which children performed independently. For example, Katrina offered: “For me, I think unstructured is more about the free play. So they’re doing it on their own or they’re thinking about it on their own or they’re involved on their own. It could be that I’m involved or that an adult or parent is involved.” Evelyn spoke of improvisation and an absence of rules in unstructured play, reflecting: “Unstructured play would be when we’re both being silly and we’re trying to improvise...no rules and nobody trying to exert control over the other person’s behaviour.”

Unstructured play was frequently linked to aspects of imagination and/or creativity. For example, Olivia defined play activities as “being outside or imaginative play” and stated that play “encourages creativity”. Ethan felt that play “is where their creativity comes from....” while

Annie remarked, “It’s cool getting to see him [son] use his imagination and play with things maybe not in the way that they are intended to be used.” By extension, the participants most frequently reported pretend play, whether by oneself (dramatic) or in the company of others (sociodramatic). These commonly had fantasy themes (e.g., superhero) or domestic or family themes and were discussed in relation to gender. Debra described her daughter’s play: “[S]he has her independent play and she’ll often play an older sister to the younger siblings and so the baby doll kind of play in a domestic kind of world”, which contrasted with her son’s play, “He was more likely to be a superhero, either male or female.” Similarly, Janelle described gender differences in play themes, stating:

My daughter is definitely more your Suzy-homemaker Mommy type. She likes the dolls and re-enacting things that happen in the house or in our daily lives. Whereas my son is like imaginary acting, superhero roles or the stories he comes up with are like what you read in a comic book.

Some participants emphasized the centrality of “make-believe” across forms of play. Erin commented, “Make-believe is huge in my house”, while Janelle reported:

[T]here’s always a story behind whatever they’re doing, right? Unless they’re following the rules of baseball to a tee, which generally doesn’t happen. There’s a story behind it whether they’re fighting on the trampoline or having a play structure. So there’s always the element of make-believe.

Other cited types of play included physical play (e.g., gross motor play). Examples were diverse; Vivian listed “running up and down [with Dad]”, while Debra described several forms of both physical play, sharing: “She’s trying to engage us some verbal or physical play...cuddling, tickling, sports, half the time batting the ball or kicking the ball or jumping on the trampoline.” Another participant, Evelyn, also described verbal play, sharing: “We engage in verbal play almost constantly...I say, ‘It’s time to go Joe, better get a move on’. We rhyme and then she speeds up and she doesn’t even notice that she’s been nagged.” Participants also described constructive play. Olivia shared that her boys “build forts and wrestle”, while Erin offered: “He’ll take rocks and leaves and dirt and watch it make a reservoir and then he’ll breach the dam and it becomes a flood.” Functional play (e.g., playing with water) was mentioned especially for children younger than school-age. The age of the participants’ children could explain its relative infrequent mention. Evelyn recollected: “When [my daughter] was little in the

winter, she would ask, “Can I have a plate of milk?” and she would go sit in the bathtub and play with that.” Additionally, while Debra listed cuddling, tickling as physical play, they would belong in the category of functional play according to Smilansky (1968). Games with rules was mentioned for school-aged children. Vivian listed “checkers, some card game, UNO”, while Penelope shared, “I play spelling bee. Then sometimes, hide-and-seek.” Commercial play objects (e.g., sporting equipment), or less commonly, play objects in the natural environment, were mentioned in all participants' accounts and ubiquitous within various forms of play. Janelle stated: “It [play] depends on what resources are available, which is what makes play culturally different.” Ethan believed that imagination and objects in the outdoor environment serve as tools for his children’s play, stating: “There are enough things outside that you can use your imagination to do what you need to do.” Mothers also commonly mentioned domestic-themed play (e.g., chores, cooking) with their children. Erin listed “mixing ingredients” as play, which prompted Annie to share: “[My son] likes to help us cook. Yea, we’re teaching him how to use the knives safely now”. In a separate focus group, Bethany shared, “My daughter likes to bake and she just takes things out of the cupboard and puts it in a bowl and I bake it in the oven and no one eats it.” School-themed play (e.g., arts play, science activities) and media play (e.g., video games) were also mentioned, although the parents who listed these activities did not consistently specify whether they constituted structured or unstructured play. Some examples of school-themed play included “colouring” (Elizabeth), “doing a science experiment” (Erin), and “crafts” (Annie).

Participants’ conceptualizations of structured activities revealed a division of views. Three distinct conceptualizations emerged across the participants’ narratives: (1) the ‘dominant’ view of play representative of the majority of participants who identified as Canadian; (2) the ‘divergent’ view of a subset of participants who identified as Canadian; (3) the ‘diverse’ view of participants of cultural backgrounds other than Canadian (i.e., Jamaican, Nigerian, and Mexican). Each of these views are considered.

The majority of participants who identified as Canadian comprised the dominant view, in which both unstructured and structured activities were embraced as play—the ensemble of which was deemed important for various domains of learning and development. Play was described as ubiquitous, as seen when Janelle stated, “It’s in within our culture – play could happen anywhere.” These participants referred to ‘structured play’ as activities with an inherent structure

(e.g., imposed by an activity) and/or adult-imposed structure. For example, Vanessa described painting as a structured activity, expressing: “I guess you can have structured play too if we’re going to paint or do something like that”. Evelyn spoke of “rules” in structured play, sharing: “Definitely structured play would be if we play a card game or something like that where there are rules to follow”. Evelyn also added an example of semi-structured play with craft kits, wherein “[T]here are three examples to copy and then it quickly gets into making whatever you want with those materials”.

Some participants expressed uncertainty when categorizing certain structured activities as play or non-play. For example, Janelle questioned her group: “When your kids are engaged in cooking or helping you wash the car or the floor, do you consider it play or do you consider that as structured activity and then what’s the difference between that and play?” The observed characteristics of the activity, notably children’s enjoyment of the activity and/or of the adult-child interaction, led the participants in Janelle’s focus group to conceptualize these domestic activities as play. Erin responded to Janelle, sharing:

I think you had a really good point. I think it’s us that have a hard time with what’s play and what’s not. Even doing dishes or that sort of thing, we might tell them that we have expectations for it, but they’re the ones that turn it into something fun.

The focus group moderator then queried the group, asking: “So, what do you not consider play?” Annie and Janelle’s responses reflected a broad view of play; Janelle quipped, “Sleeping?!” while Annie commented, “I can’t think of it” and later added, “[I]t would be a time when they’re not learning and discovering, which doesn’t happen too often.” Erin demonstrated a broad view of play, although she did set apart one activity—piano practice—from both play and work. She reflected, “Piano practice...it’s not work, it’s practice. Maybe there’s a spectrum between play and practice and work.” An all-encompassing view of play was reflected in separate focus group interviews. For example, Evelyn also described structured learning activities with both domestic and academic content as play, based on characteristics of adult-child interaction and mutual enjoyment.

I guess our learning activities that we do, they are marked as chores because she gets benefits for doing more common chores she can do. But, really, they’re my way of structuring play with her...I’ll get her to play me any song she wants on the piano. I

enjoy – she thinks physics are fun. So as long as she thinks physics are enjoyable to do, that’s me engaging in free, structured kind of play...

Surprisingly, participants holding dominant views of play generally did not (explicitly) allude to a goal-oriented nature of structured play. For example, Bethany’s described her child’s daycare activities (outings and teacher-led activities), sharing: “You come in and they’re like, ‘Oh, we’re doing this’. And you have to cut it out, so you practice cutting with scissors... But there’s no real goals, they just have fun and they’ll play.” Evelyn described rewarding completion of an academic-themed play activity, yet did not explicitly mention the goal motivating the activity: “[W]e do physics problems every day. If she does those things, then she gets stickers on a chart...”

Two types of activities in particular garnered debate across focus groups: (1) engagement with electronic media (e.g., video games) and (2) organized skill-based activities (e.g., sports, lessons). Participants espousing dominant views discussed the former as a play, learning or passive activity, depending on the type of media (e.g., television versus educational application) and the presence or absence of certain playful characteristics (i.e., game format and/or behavioural components of interaction, creation/invention and/or activity of the player(s)). For example, Debra alluded to the absence of several of these playful characteristics in electronic play on devices: “Whether or not we consider that [screen-time on personal devices] play is up for discussion. But they’re not engaging with other people or they’re not inventing anything and probably the variables are quite predetermined.” Evelyn also negated screen-time as play, but cited an example in which the device acts as a tool for play: “Actually that’s one way where device enters into play is – the girls down the street, when they come over, they very often make videos on Photobooth.” Janelle expressed indecision; she negated television as play, but questioned the categorization of video games based on the observed aspect of interaction.

I don’t necessarily consider just zoning out on a TV play. But then one could argue, my husband and my son, or both my kids or any of us, will sit and play a video game. But then I would consider it more interacting with the screen. But if you’re not considering TV play, is video games play? So, that one’s a tough one.

Bethany’s acceptance of video games as a form of play represented an outlier to the dominant view of play, a belief potentially linked to the essential game format in play, which she referenced when debating the categorization of organized lessons as play activities.

Some participants also discussed their children's participation in adult-organized skill-based activities (e.g., swimming lessons, piano lessons). Most parents who identified as Canadian did not include this type of activity as play. For example, Erin categorized piano lessons as non-play, given the inherent structure and predetermined goal in the activity.

Maybe there's a spectrum between play and practice and work. Piano, in our house, kinda falls in that middle ground. Because there is some structure, there is format and style and other components that they need to do properly so that down the road their piano-playing is easier and better. So I think that there's a future goal that sets it apart from just playtime.

In the fourth focus group interview, the moderator asked the participants, "But do you consider those activities [swimming, dance, sports] play?" Debra, Evelyn, and Katrina each responded that they were not play. Evelyn specified, "No, I consider them lessons" and Katrina stated, "I don't consider that play. I consider that learning or sports." Bethany once again represented the exception to the dominant view. She focused on the game format within organized sports activities, which she perceived as fun.

I could see that there could be play in structure. So when kids are at a soccer game where right now the first half-hour is warm-up, but their coach just plays games with them and that's their warm-up and that's where they practice different movements. But in the context of a game, so they're having fun.

A subgroup of participants who identified as Canadian, represented most notably by married couple Olivia and Ethan, held divergent views. While they listed similar forms of unstructured play as did other participants who identified as Canadian, their perspective on structured activities differed markedly. Olivia outlined the distinction: "But play to me is just very unstructured. There's no instruction or guidance, that's how in my mind how I delineate." Olivia and Ethan discussed the views of play in their *middle-class* community to include skill-based structured activities (e.g., swimming), which they personally opposed. As Olivia shared:

[T]here's the sort-of structured, school-type work. I don't think of that as play. But I think a lot of parents now – my perception anyway is that you can just register your kids in organized play. So if it's swimming or gymnastics, that's playing. But in my mind, that's an activity, that's not playing. They're learning a skill there...

Ethan extended this thought, stating: "But I think a lot of parents think of it as play –

think of it as a fun activity to get kids playing. But it's not – it's still defined parameters at all times.” Ethan and Olivia additionally regarded other structured activities as learning, such as those with domestic and academic content (e.g., painting, colouring, educational videos). Ethan declared, “[We’ll get them] involved with cooking brownies or something where they’re kind of helping along or helping me in the garage or helping put things away, but I wouldn’t consider that play so much as learning experience.”

Finally, the participants self-identifying as being from diverse cultures (Vivian, Martin, Elizabeth, and Penelope) discussed conceptualizations of children’s play. Akin to the beliefs of many parents who identified as Canadian, Vivian, Elizabeth, and Penelope acknowledged both structured and unstructured forms of children’s play. Vivian illustrated these two dimensions of play as such: “There is a structure where there is an adult controlling or structuring the play and then there’s an independent element where the kids are allowed to play or just free to do what they want to do.” Further, they all referenced the distinct expression of play (i.e., structured or unstructured) in relation to physical (e.g., outdoor play) and/or social settings (e.g., play with teachers). For example, Penelope offered: “So my definition of play is sometimes it can be structured, sometimes it’s unstructured. Unstructured when they’re outside and structured when you’re home with them.” Similarly, Elizabeth shared, “I think it’s [play] actually important, but it just depends on the kind of play and where the play is.” Both participants originally from Nigeria, Elizabeth and Penelope, provided cultural definitions of play in relation to its setting and emphasized the importance of children “being free” in play. Elizabeth offered a traditional definition of play as a free, unrestricted activity occurring outdoors:

I also agree with what Annie and Janelle said [regarding definitions of play], but I’ll do a comparison between back home in Nigeria. It’s the same thing, but of course back home in Nigeria, we define play as just being outside – getting dirty, getting sweaty.

Conversely, when Elizabeth and Penelope described indoor play, it was associated with structure and adult involvement. Albeit between the two, they held different perceptions of the relative freedom of play in home versus school settings. Daycare play seemed restricted to Elizabeth when she stated: “I think they are more free at home compared to the daycare.” For Penelope, play in the household was the most restricted, which she related to the social setting—a “strict” Nigerian culture—whereas play in school was free. She shared:

To me, having the kind of background that I have, the way my parents are – let’s say most Nigerians are kind of strict. You are not free just to play anyhow, except when you’re in school. When you’re in school, you can play anyhow. But when you’re home, it’s a kind of restricted play. You have to be careful, you have to do this at this time...

Elizabeth and Penelope provided examples of household activities, which elucidated their meanings of “structure” to relate to a focus on learning (i.e., of academic skills or behaviours) associated with adult-involvement. Correspondingly, Elizabeth’s repertoire of play included structured adult-led activities (i.e. school-themed parent-child play) designed to target predetermined learning goals. Yet, she recognized the paradox of this conceptualization, stating: “So, when you tell them to go play, for them it’s play, but for us, we know what we want them to actually learn. So that’s learning.” For Penelope, her repertoire of play activities encompassed activities involving didactic instructional methods, such as assisting with “memorizations” (homework from extra-curricular language school).

My daughter is learning Arabic. After school, she goes to the Arabic school to spend three hours between Monday and Thursdays. So I am kind of – I am not fluent, but I have some knowledge about Arabic. So when she comes home with assignments and memorizations, which I know and we read it together. When she makes mistakes, I try to correct her. So during that period, if I make mistakes as well, she tries to correct me. So I gain more as well when I play with her.

Further, Penelope uniquely endorsed co-viewing electronic media as play, in which her role involved teaching appropriate behaviours displayed in YouTube videos. She reported:

There are series – when they are taught how to relate with each other, when they are taught how to accommodate friends and the like. So, sometimes I pause, maybe when the statement is made. I try to explain, “OK, this is what they meant. This is how it should be, this is how it shouldn’t be.” So, we keeping playing it as I go. It’s a step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means. That’s the way we play, sometimes.

Vivian who self-identified as Jamaican, discussed her play conceptualizations. Initially, she represented an outlier in her perception of play and learning as dichotomous concepts. She first stated, “Play would be a carefree activity. I guess there would be thinking involved, but it’s just enjoying each other’s company or your own company. That’s it – carefree.” However, she

revised her beliefs over the course of her focus group interview to consider the learning value of play, reflecting: “So perhaps there is some value to this play in terms of learning. I never thought of it before until now.” She listed several household play activities associated with her initial conceptualizations of play. For example, she shared:

[My son] is into this family play night, so he’ll keep on reminding us that it’s games night. So whether or not we’re supposed to be playing checkers, some card game, UNO or something like that, he enjoys those kind of games. I think it’s the company that he enjoys more. So that for him is play.

Another example was the practice of play as a reward. Vivian shared: “Contextualizing what Vanessa said; so, it’s a juxtaposition – work or play? So for (son), he would have a football game that he would play on the tablet. And for him, I would say to him, “OK, you can’t get to do that until you do your homework”.

Finally, Martin also discussed his conceptualization of play for his two-year-old son. He raised an issue with the notion of play and work as separate, as in Vivian’s example. He offered: “I think, personally, it would be a mistake to do that separation... This is work, this is play. This is structured, this is non-structured.” Martin, like Penelope and Elizabeth, perceived the goal-oriented nature of certain forms of play. He continued his thought, sharing “[I]f we want to get the goals that we want to get from play, we need to put some structure to that. We need to put some goals into it.” Martin also described the expression of play in relation to its purpose (i.e., what you want to build) and setting (home, school), expressing:

I’m not saying that play means completely structured and rules. All I’m saying is that, it cannot be divided. It’s completely free of rules, right? I’m saying that it can be both, right? At home, we might have one type. At school, we might have another one, right? I mean, it’s just defining what kind you want in certain places, right, and what you want to build”.

Play activities for Martin thus encompassed unstructured and goal-oriented structured activities alike. As stated earlier, he described an unstructured environment for his toddler, sharing: “So he does pretty much everything he wants. The only thing I try to push into him is the liking of sports, just because I think it’s really important for their development, right?”

In summary, in this first theme, the participants discussed their play conceptualizations. Three distinct views of play emerged: (1) the dominant view representing the views of the

majority self-identifying Canadian group, for whom play was a ubiquitous childhood activity and broadly conceptualized to include unstructured activities and structured activities; (2) the divergent view representing a minority of the self-identifying Canadian group, for whom play was viewed in its traditional sense as an unstructured, free activity devoid of adult involvement; and (3) the diverse view representing the views of participants identifying with backgrounds other than Canadian, for whom play activities were conceptualized broadly. Uniquely within this view, the expression of play was linked to its social (e.g., with teacher) and physical settings (e.g., indoor) and parents acknowledged the goal-oriented structure of certain forms of play. Within each of the focus group interviews, parents generated a broad spectrum of play activities, including structured (e.g., cooking with a parent) and unstructured activities (e.g., making forts). The developmental value of the play activities, as expressed by the participants, was captured in Theme 2: The Value of Play: Developmental Benefits in Six Key Areas.

4.3 Theme 2 The Value of Play: Developmental Benefits in Six Key Areas

The participants discussed the perceived developmental value of their children's play experiences and had varying conceptualizations of play. Their beliefs about the developmental value of play in turn revealed a diversity of patterns. Inductive coding revealed six key areas of development triangulated across the fourteen participants: (1) intrapersonal development; (2) socio-emotional development; (3) language development; (4) cognitive development; (5) physical growth and development; and (6) career and economic development.

The majority of participants commented on intrapersonal development through play (i.e., developing personally significant internal skills and dispositions). Three subtypes were delineated: (1) learning how to enjoy oneself; (2) learning independence; and (3) discovering one's identity. Martin, Katrina, Janelle, and Evelyn discussed their children's play as a way to learn how to enjoy themselves. For example, Martin spoke of children discovering preferred activities and in particular, the importance of the parental role:

I think it's important to have some leading, some plan or overall just to let kids try [an activity]. If they try it and they don't like it, then it could be a fun activity but it's not play. But if they try it and they enjoy it and they want to do it on their own eventually, then it becomes a voluntary thing and then it becomes play.

Katrina discussed play as a means to discover interests, offering: [I]t helps them to find interests whether it be books or balls or whatever. It lets them explore a variety of things.

Similarly, Janelle stated:

I like to try to expose my children to anything and everything...because maybe there's something they haven't tried that's going to be their new found passion or it will help them discover something about themselves or someone else that they never knew before.

Another type of intrapersonal development was learning independence. According to nine participants (Janelle, Martin, Katrina, Olivia, Ethan, Bethany, Debra, Annie, Evelyn), children initiate their own play activities, entertain themselves, learn limitations and abilities, and make individual accomplishments in play—all of which build independence. For example, Olivia & Ethan strongly associated value of unstructured play in areas of intrapersonal development. Olivia listed “learning their own limitations” when asked about the value of play. She also spoke of developing autonomy in play, sharing: “[Y]ou see now, kids, it's like they're waiting to be entertained...[K]ids are lacking that sort of autonomy or independence and learning to fill their own time.” Ethan described their household practice to facilitate the learning of independence in play as: “After supper, it's just, ‘Go outside and play or go downstairs’ and I think that's kind of at least the precursor that we're trying to develop is just – you guys are on your own.”

Additionally, Bethany spoke of making independent accomplishments in play, which led to increased self-worth. She shared, “[It] makes you feel good about yourself. I think that goes along with the enjoyment and freedom. You feel like you get some kind of self-worth out of it. You feel good that you built a castle or you're able to swing on the monkey bars the whole way.”

The last type of intrapersonal development was self-identity, which concerned the freedom to discover and develop one's sense of identity. For example, Debra commented that her daughter's character play helps her develop “a sense of self” and empathy, sharing:

I see this with my two kids and their ideas of empathy. So...she will play both characters...She has an idea of what both characters are experiencing from those interactions and I think that's really important to develop - a sense of self - but also different personas and interactions and social interactions and the repercussions from her voice, or word choice, or power dynamic.

However, this comment referred to female character play only. Debra continued, “I wouldn’t see my son developing his empathy with this kind of character play. He was more likely to be a superhero, either male or female.”

Evelyn and Annie both believed that through play, children can develop a sense of identity without restriction to stereotypical gender ideas. Evelyn valued the freedom to explore nonconforming gender roles based on her own personal experiences.

I think a big part for me and my sisters with play was we did a lot of role-playing. So we could be orphans or we’d be playing outside and who’s going to be the dad and that kind of stuff. So I think it was a lot about exploring possibilities and there was no repercussions or ideas about what it meant about who we actually were...

Annie advocated gender-neutral play practices to avoid imposing gender ideas:

[My son] does a bit of everything [in terms of play] and we don’t have gendered toys. He has whatever he wants...I don’t like the idea of him being defined as: “I’m a boy, so therefore I play with cars and have superheroes and a girl job is cooking and cleaning..

The participants frequently referenced the domain of socio-emotional learning and the subtypes: (1) effective social interactions; (2) emotional-regulation; and (3) emotional persistence. The comments of Janelle, Annie, Martin, Vivian, Bethany, Evelyn, Olivia, and Ethan reflected the first type of socio-emotional learning: effective social interactions. Evelyn spoke of “accommodat[ing] others peoples’ ideas” in play, sharing:

I think it’s around three or four where they test the ability to make other people do things and that’s where we would play these games where I had to make my LEGO this colour or follow these rules. And I taught her about the rule of improv, where you never say no when you’re playing. You say, “yes” and accommodate other people’s ideas.

Penelope spoke of teaching effective social interactions portrayed in a cartoon show:

There are series – when they are taught how to relate with each other, when they are taught how to accommodate friends and the like. So, sometimes I pause, maybe when the statement is made. I try to explain, “OK, this is what they meant. This is how it should be, this is how it shouldn’t be.” So, we keeping playing it as I go. It’s a step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means. That’s the way we play, sometimes.

Vivian referenced the cooperative skill of turn-taking when she said: “They’re learning social skills. They’re learning how to take turns without having somebody to direct them how to do that.” Martin and Bethany described learning leadership and communication skills in play. Martin felt that “playing is where we build leadership, where we build social skills and our communication...” while Bethany shared “that leader who is structuring it, they build their social skills.” Janelle felt children can improve their understanding and appropriately responses in social interactions during play, stating, “[I]f they’re playing with another child and they’re having a sword fight, they’re learning things about that other child; he doesn’t like it when I do that or he thinks it’s funny when I do this.” Olivia believed the social skill of integrating and participating in group activities was best acquired through play with peers. She valued peer play at daycare for the opportunity to develop this skill, offering:

If his little buddies are dancing to the song, he would potentially partake in that. Versus if I was there, he would potentially use me as a shield or a comfort as opposed to trying new things. So I think that if you’re with other kids, you’re influenced differently than when you’re with parents.

The second type of socio-emotional learning was emotional-regulation. Annie observed the development of her son’s emotional-regulation skills, which she reasoned was an outcome of his collaborative peer play at daycare. She shared:

It [play] also helps to learn problem-solving... [H]e loves being with the other kids and you can tell that he’s learning. He even speaks differently to me. When I disagree with something that he says, he kinda tries to problem solve with me now... You can tell he’s learning to regulate his emotions and he’s developed internal methods of coping with big toddler feelings...

Evelyn spoke similarly of her daughter’s collaborative peer play for learning emotional stability, sharing:

[S]he’s also the oldest of her cousins and of those four kids next door. So she had to have a lot of patience with toddler-like behaviour. It’s been in play that I’ve seen her develop emotional stability. I’m proud of her when I see her able to engage other kids in play.”

A third distinct type of learning in the area of socio-emotional learning was emotional persistence. For example, Ethan provided an example of an adult choosing the more difficult task

of calling versus texting someone. He believed the key life skills (i.e., taking risks and handling rejection) necessary to carry out such a task are developed through independent play, stating:

Hopefully, through play a kid learns, “I can triumph in this conversation or be shut down – rejected – and handle the rejection.” That doesn’t happen from structured things that parents put them in or protect them from. The only way they can develop into a fully functional adult is – in the early years. Oh, [groans] I honestly think it’s one of the most important things for children.

Martin and Erin shared similar convictions about the value of play in preparing children for success in later life through the challenges it presents. Martin referred to the “up-and-downs” in play and the important learning lessons they endow, reporting:

I’m very interested and that’s the reason I’m here is that: How we can put kids or create this environment for kids to play, to have fun, overall enjoyment? But at the same time have those up and downs that allow them to understand their real world and be prepared for that and learn from those experiences.

Several parents (i.e., Janelle, Erin, Annie, Elizabeth, Martin, Penelope, Evelyn, Katrina, Debra) alluded to play’s potential in the area of language development. These comments mostly referred to children repeating and testing out overheard words and phrases in play. For example, Erin remarked that while engaged in solitary play, “[My son] is testing out all the words that he hears from myself or my husband’s research. He’s trying it out for himself”, while Penelope described watching television as a play activity thought to build children’s language fluency, reporting:

I want the younger ones to develop their minds very well. So I want them to learn, so most of the time I put on the TV. They watch cartoons. So when they watch cartoons, my three-year-old boy is learning how to speak fluently...the way they speak there, that is how he speaks. And I’m in love with [cartoon] because of the British accent.

Elizabeth also described the benefits of electronic media, given her observation of her son re-enacting, and rehearsing media content in dramatic play, reporting:

He’s in the world of [television series]. Even if he’s not watching it on the telly, he’s watching it with his words. So, the [television series] really helps him. Before then, he was listening to himself. But it’s like the [television series] never ends, even if the telly is off, he speaks [television series], he says everything [television series].

Elizabeth also commented on play within the daycare as a context to help encourage the development of her son's language skills. She shared, "I think it's [play] actually important, but it just depends on the kind of play and where the play is. For my son...when he got to the daycare, I think he found other kids talking and then he learned from them [imitates child talk]."

Ten participants (i.e., Erin, Annie, Bethany, Vivian, Olivia, Ethan, Evelyn, Debra, Janelle, Vanessa) linked play to cognitive development with comments mostly referring to two main types: (1) exploration of concepts and (2) organization of concepts. Debra and Bethany discussed play pedagogies in the daycare setting valued for their potential to facilitate exploration. Debra described a guided play activity she observed at her daughter's preschool, stating:

The children with their little tiny fingers would have to figure out how to open the binder clips and put them around the cardboard. At first, they would be shown to do that one way and they would kind of make an effort. But from there, whatever the kids wanted to do next. They would learn from each other...I really like that kind of intermediate where they are presented with an opportunity to explore something that they might not otherwise have considered.

Bethany described her daughter's daycare, in which the teacher helped children explore a range of activities and responded to the children's inquiries. She shared:

They do a lot of reading, but they don't necessarily have, "OK, we're going to practice math now or we're going to practice your letters" or "We're doing to practice your writing." It's just – you come in and they're like, "Oh, we're doing this." And you have to cut it out, so you practice cutting with scissors or they might even ask, "Well, how can I write my name?" And the teachers will be like, "Oh, I'll help you there"...

Bethany also noticed her children developing cognitive skills (i.e., creativity, generalization of knowledge) in their play at home. She shared:

I notice with my kids all the time, they're so wrapped up in what they're doing and they're just like, "Okay, well we need a truck" or something. "Okay, well, let's make one." My kid has a fidget spinner – "Look we can make this into a fidget spinner"...that creativity where they kinda know what they want and then because they can – they're free to do what they want. "Well, let's find what we have here" and it's making those

connections in their head that, “Hey, I can use these things to make something else” and they can use that knowledge in other situations then too.

Similarly, Erin described her children’s piano playing, sharing: [O]ur kids do make their own music sometimes or try to figure out stuff and play on the piano together, so that makes it [play].” Whether it be a fidget toy or new music, both creativity and imagination were associated with exploration in these comments.

A second type of cognitive development was organization of concepts. Both Olivia and Janelle saw their children organizing ideas encounter in daily life through dramatic play. Olivia shared:

I just think it’s like the breeding ground for learning for kids. It’s how they synthesize life is through recreating it. There are so many scenarios where, especially our oldest now, he has such a vivid imagination that: “Imagine if I was this and I could do this and that”, and he goes and pretends and acts it out...

Vanessa additionally considered the ability to better “digest” academic material through play as opposed to academic activities, sharing:

But it would be nice if they could incorporate some more ways to play and I get it, it’s hard. When you’ve got 20 kids, how do you make a fun game where you know they’re learning? They kind of have to pull out the math sheets and here, “Do it.” But...I think it would help him, just because of his personality and the type of children that he is. That *he* – he would learn so much better having more time to play and kind of digest it in that way as opposed to, “Here’s the worksheets, get to work.”

Evelyn and Debra described how they themselves could contribute to children’s play in this area. For example, Evelyn offered: “I think, with my own daughter – especially because she loves knowing things – I think the idea of giving educational tools and teaching can be supporting their play as well.” Additionally, Debra shared:

You put them in a car seat, they find things to play. They start making puppets with fingers or counting things outside the car. They have a lot of agency with it, but there’s ways that we can enrich or support it or take it in a different direction and they influence each other too.

There was a relative absence of references to cognitive development from parents of diverse backgrounds, with the exception of Vivian. Initially, Vivian emphasized play as carefree

and de-emphasized the thinking processes involved. However, upon her reflection of play memories as well as the comments of fellow participants, Vivian demonstrated emerging recognition of links between play and other areas of development, including cognitive development. She recollected:

Experiential learning as well – back home the boys would make trucks with juice boxes. They didn't have a truck from a store, but they are developing the skills and that's play. So they make their own trucks...and then they go out and they race them. So they're developing their own cognitive skills as well as relational skills.

Amongst many rich elements, Vivian's example depicts children delving into ideas in play, thereby reflection of play as exploration type of cognitive development.

Eight participants (Penelope, Elizabeth, Martin, Annie, Janelle, Erin, Bethany, Katrina) referenced play as a vehicle for physical growth and development. Katrina described the function of her sons' physical play as a space to test the limits of physical strength:

There's four boys and they're very physical with each other and they're in the pool and it's just dunking and physical and throwing balls. As parents, me and my sisters are watching and we say, "Well, this is where they learn what they can do and they test their limits of physical strength or their language or their coolness. It's kind of a space for them to do that.

According to Penelope, play can be an important physical exercise. She offered, "[I]t [play] can be a kind of exercise. So they exercise and they build their body system. So they are fit in that respect when they play around." Erin mentioned physical growth, commenting that: "I think our kids grow more when they just get to play, even over the summer. Physically too, but emotionally and socially, and yea, curiosity..." whereas Annie felt that "it's really important for their development even for learning gross-motor skills or fine motor-skills."

Bethany and Martin raised a concern for the lack of physical activity in the classroom, which prompted them to integrate more in their home practices. For example, Bethany listed play with obstacle courses to target her children's physical development. She shared:

I often forget the learning of their fundamental movement skills. That's something that we do at home a lot because I don't feel they get enough physical activity in the classroom. So...especially in the winter, we create obstacle courses throughout whatever space we're in.

Martin listed home practices designed to develop his son's physical skills (e.g., kicking a ball) and provided play resources obliging physical activity, stating:

I recently bought him a little car where he sits and you push and it seems like a great idea...But when he's on top of that, he's not exercising. So, now, we're at the point where we are limiting that and we got him a little bike that we still push, but at least he'll move his feet a little more.

Two participants, Penelope and Elizabeth, who were both from Nigeria, uniquely articulated the contribution of play in the final domain of career and economic development. Penelope stated: "[Play] contributes to the physical, to the social, the economic development of the child." Elizabeth explained the cultural view of play as marking the beginning of career development: "For us back home, that's [in play] where development really starts and then you get to understand what the child will be comfortable doing as a career...[Y]ou get to understand what their future will be and you train them towards that life."

Overall, participants valued play as a natural, developmentally-appropriate activity. Several participants expressed strong value of play as the child's leading developmental activity, as indicated in statements such as, "Honestly, I think it's the most relevant aspect of a child's development" (Ethan) and "I think it's not just important, it's vital, for kids to play, especially given the struggles they're going to be facing in the future" (Erin). Janelle and Annie valued play, but advocated a balance between play and non-play activities. Janelle felt "I think the balance between play and structured learning time is key", which prompted Annie to concede that "there needs to be boundaries." Two participants expressed the notion that play might be child-specific. Bethany commented: "I think it would help him, just because of his personality and the type of children that he is. That *he* – he would learn so much better having more time to play...", while Vanessa mentioned, "I think it [play] is such an individual thing that one kid can be totally fine without any play and another one, that's what they need the whole day, right?" Finally, Elizabeth spoke of the importance of play as it relates to the type and setting of play, sharing: "I think it's actually important, yea, but it just depends on the kind of play and where the play is." Despite the finding that each parent expressed a value of play in at least two areas of development, participants expressed shared and/or individual constraints affecting children's opportunities to play.

4.4 Theme 3 The Decline of Play: Constraints to Play Opportunities

Participants reviewed children's opportunities to play within their respective cultures. One of the major cultural trends emerging from their discussions was the scheduling and structuring of children's play. The majority of participants (i.e., Katrina, Evelyn, Olivia, Ethan, Debra, Bethany, Martin, Elizabeth, Vivian) attested to a generational and cultural shift in children's lives away from independent play toward "structured play" and/or "organized activities." For example, Katrina and Evelyn described the changing nature of play. Katrina shared:

I think, growing up in the 80s, play was very unstructured and it was simple, especially in small town Saskatchewan. It was play, I think, in the true sense of the word. I think today there are thoughts of or concepts of structured play, which is also getting to activities...I don't think unstructured play is as common as it was when I was a child.

Evelyn responded to Katrina:

Yea, I grew up in Saskatoon and play was largely unstructured and after you were four or something, you could easily go down the street and play with other children without your parents following you or anything. So that's changed a lot: the amount of supervision our kids get these days.

Accounting for this trend in part was the prevalence of scheduled organized activities. Differences were noted in the type of skill encouraged by the culture and the parents themselves. For example, Elizabeth described the typical schedule of a Nigerian family household, including academic and sports activities. She shared:

What they [the children] do basically is everyday of the week, they are in one sport, one practice, one rehearsal. The weekends, they don't really have any activities apart from soccer, which is on Saturday. But as soon as they get back home, they have math tutors that come to the house to teach them just to put them updates with the British standard of education...So, it's around the clock...But we feel it's what we need to do to put them in line with maybe our own background or our own upbringing...

Penelope, also originally from Nigeria, reported her six-year-old child's participation in an organized activity, which focused on early formal learning of a foreign language: "My daughter is learning Arabic. After school, she goes to the Arabic school to spend three hours between Monday and Thursdays." Penelope's comment aligned with Elizabeth's description of

the typically highly-structured and highly-scheduled household of Nigerian families. However, Penelope did not mention any potential negative impact of this activity on children's playtime.

The remainder of participants who indicated their children's participation organized activities (i.e., Evelyn, Katrina, Vivian, Martin, Olivia, and Ethan) mentioned those targeting non-academic skills (e.g., piano, soccer), signaling its cultural-relevancy. Evelyn shared, "We do dance and swimming and a couple other things" and later added piano practice. In response to the focus group moderator, Katrina expressed: "You had mentioned in your urban centres [in Jamaica], there's a lot of shuffling to activities. And I guess, here too, I mentioned that. I don't consider that play. I consider that learning or sports." Vivian, originally from Jamaica, shared that her son "...will also play structured play, in terms of, we'll also send him to play football."

Martin also commented on organized sports. He was encouraging of sports, yet he perceived a highly-structured nature of Canadian sports (unlike in Mexican culture). His comments suggested that the scheduling and structuring children's play is not only a household trend, but a cultural trend. He made links to Canadian sports institutions, sharing:

When I came to Canada, I noticed that everything in terms of sports is very well-structured. You cannot play in the street; you have to go in the field. In the field, you cannot step in the field unless you pay your fees and there is a coach and someone taking care of you – in terms of liability. So, I think that poses a big barrier for having that freedom to play whenever you want.

Martin articulated the contingency of the freedom to play in Canada as compared to his home country in Mexico. He felt that the freedom to play was reserved for children of families able to commit time and finances, stating: "So now you have to put through your kid through a four-month system of soccer, basketball...Some parents cannot afford that. That's a big problem. Even if you can afford it, you might not have the time." Martin also considered the negative impacts of overly-structured play on children's enjoyment of the activity, stating: "And the third [problem] is, the kid might not like it as much as they will like to be free playing for ten minutes and forget about it, and go home to something else."

Olivia and Ethan also noted a rise in structured and scheduled children's play across settings (school, community) within their cultural group and speculated the potential effects. Olivia reported:

This became of interest because culturally, we're moving away [from free play]. I think the value we're placing on all these structured activities way outweigh this free play and obviously we don't know the impacts of that yet, but I don't think any other generation has been as scheduled as our current kids are.

Ethan questioned the developmental benefits reaped from an organized play activity subject to external constraints. He felt that "the creativity is lacking in structured play, because it's parents or coaches or whoever defining the world that children interact in." Like Martin, Ethan also held concerns about the lack of available play partners and free play in the community. He described the neighbourhood play environment, reporting a reduced number of available play partners partly "because the kids are either already in activities or the parents give them a PlayStation to play on." He continued:

So there almost has to be a whole shift in having a lot parents just dumping their kids out into the neighborhood to play. Otherwise they're in a wasteland. The kids go out and there's nobody to interact with or play with, so here we are back in.

The displacement of play by structured activities in educational settings was observable to some of the participants, while others commented on its developmental value. Elizabeth, Erin, Olivia, and Ethan depicted play in ECE as a structured, supervised, organized activity confined to specific time periods and relegated to specific areas. For example, Elizabeth discussed time and space constraints, stating: "There are rules and structures in the daycare. They just do what – 'Okay, you play with this for this time and then move over there.' To me I find the daycare actually isn't allowing the child to really be free..." Erin voiced concern for the quality of daycare play, given a schedule which does not allow for free-flowing spontaneous play. She shared:

I think there are boundaries in the daycare. With a 15-minute recess, the kids could be doing make-believe or some really deep narrative about something but the recess bell rings and it has to stop. Whereas they play at home and they could act out the same thing for hours and hours.

Ethan spoke of over-supervision of free play, sharing: "I don't think it's enough free [play], even though it's scheduled as free play. Because there's still an adult watching fairly closely." In Olivia's discussions about registration in ECE with fellow parents, she remarked the preponderance of structured activities. She shared, "You're often comparing what kind of

activities they get to do in the day: ‘Oh, our kids get to go on field trips’...it’s almost like we’re placing more value on the institutions that provide less free time to play.”

However, Annie and Bethany participants expressed favour of these same “constraints” in the daycare. For example, Annie valued the involvement of the daycare staff in children’s activities when she said that, “I noticed that my son’s gross motor skills have gotten so much better since he started at daycare just because I guess they can do more stuff than I did at home.” Bethany spoke positively of daycare activities (e.g., outings) and did not feel play was comprised or lacking, “[T]heir outings will be to the little schoolhouse and there’s apparently some castle on campus or something that – and they just use their imagination. So the daycare is all play.”

Some participants also reviewed play at the elementary school level. Erin bemoaned a teacher’s decision to take away recess. She stated:

I think play is like a currency of childhood. And one of the ways that structure in our society, like school, can destroy a childhood is by taking that currency away. We’ve had a teacher this year that takes away recess as punishment. And it has been awful for a lot of the kids in the class.

Martin envisaged future school problems for his son due to the prioritization of academics in the school environment. He shared:

I know my son, for example, he’s very active, probably like your son. He never has enough time to play. And sometimes that could be a problem...Especially when he goes to this setting where they want to try to teach him math or science and this and that. He’s not going to be happy.

Vanessa also commented on the detriments of an academically-focused elementary school environment for her son.

I don’t think they have enough [play]. Because especially with my older son, he’s a December baby. So I probably could have put him behind a grade, but I didn’t. I sent him to school and it seems like it’s *a lot* of schoolwork...So I would like to see that. I think they’re better, like they’ve been getting better. But it would be nice that, if they could incorporate some more ways to play.

A few parents (i.e., Janelle, Elizabeth, and Annie) nonetheless posited positive benefits to different forms of structured non-play activities in educational institutions given their

underpinning values for children. For example, Janelle and Annie both spoke about the necessity of structured learning time, which meant shutting off play at times. Janelle shared:

[T]here's nights when my kids will have homework or reading from school and they're just so engrossed in play, and it's like, "This is what you need to be doing right now, you're still interacting, you're growing, you're learning, you're discovering"...[Y]ou're internally motivated and sometimes, yes you do have to shut it off because you do need to learn the balance between structured and unstructured...[A] balance between play and structured learning time is key. 'Cause, you don't want a wild child who can't come into the classroom or sit in church or go grocery shopping with their parents because they're climbing up the shelves.

This prompted Annie to respond, "There needs to be boundaries." Elizabeth spoke of non-play activities (i.e., daycare discipline practices) as promoting her son's developing emotional regulation skills:

I never did timeout with my son. He actually brought it home and taught me. And then after awhile it changed from time-out then to the washroom. So, if he's not happy, then I'll [say], "Do you want to go to the washroom?" Or he wants something and I say "No." He then gets fussy and I say, "Do you want to go to the washroom?" He just changes and now wants to express himself and listen to Mommy – "What is she about to say?"

The second major cultural trend the participants commonly observed was the curtailing of children's play according to cultural standards of behaviour. This was considered to be an emerging cultural issue. For example, Evelyn recalled the absence of parental intervention in their own childhood play experiences, sharing:

I think we got away with almost everything if we were playing. You're just playing. Kids will be kids or whatever...We said all kinds of horrible things when we were playing [Laughs]. That I could now see, people would have been correcting us.

Ethan similarly described his childhood play experiences, recalling: "There was lots of times – we got into – not in trouble with our parents, but things that we shouldn't have been doing that we didn't tell our parents. So there was a lot of independence, I guess."

Katrina, Debra, and Janelle discussed implicit guidelines dictating the expression of play in particular settings with particular play partners. Katrina described her sons' unrestricted physical play with their familiar play partners (cousins), sharing: "[T]hey're in the pool and it's

just dunking and physical and throwing balls...” Yet, she stated would not permit this play with other play partners in all contexts: “Whereas if they go with some of their friends, I wouldn’t allow a lot of that: ‘You can’t do that. That’s not OK’. She offered a reason earlier in the focus group interview when she said:

To me, I guess safety is an issue, whether it’s blown-up or not, I don’t know. But maybe that took away from some of the play and the political correctness. You were mentioning that some of these things would be corrected. And now I look at them and I see it. Yea, you’re right, my kids were playing – twenty years ago I would have let them do whatever, but now it’s like, “Oh you can’t say that”, and even in play, “You can’t do that.”

This prompted Debra to comment that “it’s true - what you said earlier about political correctness - knowing that other parents might not be OK with what the kids are doing...”

Discussions of play in minority communities (ethnic and/or religious) also revealed unique restrictions to children’s play. Evelyn described the importance of providing a variety of unrestricted play experiences for her daughter, akin to her own play experiences which involved a lot of “physical play” (e.g., karate). Contrasting with her own practices, she perceived children’s play as a context for socialization in her ex-husband’s minority cultural community:

And some of the context that my ex-husband takes my daughter to – girls are supposed to wear ankle-length skirts. So they’re there for the whole weekend, but they’re in a gender role and their play is expected to be in that gender role as well. And play is more about modelling adult behaviour in a way. But I disagree personally [laughs]. It irks me because I really don’t like the idea feeling as though my daughter has to curb her imagination to fit an adult’s imagination of who she is.

For Penelope, a practicing Muslim, she viewed intervention in her children’s play as necessary in order to regulate play according to the broader ideas and values about childhood and gender defined by her religious community.

You have to monitor them, especially the younger ones. Not the younger ones alone, but maybe the teenagers. For the teenagers you have to be concerned by the way they play with each other. For example, me as a Muslim, there’s a kind of restriction where you’re reaching maturity; you have to restrict your play with the opposite sex. In that situation, I have to be very vigilant of how my children play...

Many participants acknowledged numerous threats to play imposed by each of their respective cultures. A few participants, however, demonstrated value on certain structured aspects of children's lives (e.g., teacher-led activities) and adult intervention in children's play (e.g., to guide play according to cultural/religious values), which other participants perceived as constraining behaviours. All of the participants nevertheless valued play for a variety of developmental purposes and demonstrated a strong desire to provide quality play experiences for their children. At the same time, tensions were apparent between the participants' beliefs and desires and their ability to provide such experiences.

Major individual constraints included safety concerns and parental resources (i.e., finances, responsibilities, time). While most participants advocated free, unrestricted play, safety was nonetheless identified as a common concern. Specifically, some participants raised safety concerns related to two forms of play (free play and physical play), which were associated with close adult supervision. One example relates to Katrina's aforementioned concern of physical play in certain contexts due to cultural standards of behaviour. She felt supervision was warranted when she permitted her children to engage in physical play: "I don't like if there's no parent around. I don't like them to be involved in some physical activities. I guessed I'm scared of something happening and no adult around." Penelope also outlined the importance of being "careful" and minding safety in regards to her children's indoor play:

And being that they are so young, my eyes are always working. All the parts of my body are always working: "Where's your brother? What's he doing in washroom? Is he sleeping? Is he playing with something dangerous?" So my mind is always with them: "What are you doing?" You have to be very careful when they're playing...

More commonly, participants' safety concerns related to perceptions of danger in the urban environment. Bethany suggested that supervision of children's outdoor play has increased across generations, in response to Martin's comment about the over-structured nature of sports play in Canada. She shared:

I think that may be a generational thing as well. Because if I think about when I was growing up, when the street lights come on, you'd come back home. And so you would go out and I lived behind a school yard and so I would just go out and the neighborhood kids would be out there and be like, "Oh, let's play tennis" or "Let's play baseball" and "Let's play soccer" and it was that very spontaneous neighborhood play... We didn't have

structured play unless we were put in lessons of some sort and now I think there is less of that... there are a lot of barriers for people to go and do that kind of play.

Vivian recalled her own play experiences in Jamaica of unsupervised play compared to her experience as a parent supervising play in Canada. She responded to Bethany:

I can agree with the generational point made. Because I remember when my brothers were growing up, once they got home they could go to the field and play but of course, you have to go home once the light comes on. And I wouldn't tell my son to do that. No matter how old and where he is going to play, one of us will be behind him to check to see whether or not everything is alright. So I guess it's maybe safety...

Penelope also described the necessity to supervise outdoor play and the time constraints affecting her ability to do so: "I don't even have the time to take those children out to play every now and then." Vanessa's comment suggested that certain characteristics of the urban environment may ease safety concerns related to outdoor play. She described the proximity and visibility of the local park from the family's house, reporting:

The park is right beside our house. So, I can go on the deck and I can see the park. So I do. He's seven; "You're fine, you can go to the park." I don't let the five-year-old. But probably in a year or two I'll say, "Yea, you guys are fine." And then when I want them to come, I can just walk out and get them. I mean if I was further away, I don't think I'd be as comfortable. But I am trying to let them go out a little more like that and just go do your thing.

Conversely, Penelope discussed elements of urban living impeding play. She voiced the restrictions apartment living imposes on her children's indoor play:

Our apartment – we live at the first floor. So people living downstairs sometimes complain of my children running up and down. So most times I try to call them: "Hey, there are people living down, you have to be very very careful. When you're playing, you don't have to be jumping up and down." So it's kind of restricted.

Overall, the participants regarded play as being bounded and subject to both cultural and individual constraints. The participants discussed two major cultural play trends (i.e. scheduling and structuring of play, cultural standards of behaviour), making links with religious/cultural, sports, and educational structures. The impacts of these trends were mostly assumed to be negative and detrimental to children's play, however a few participants posited positive

consequences for children's development when referencing the same trends. Further, while the participants demonstrated a desire to provide quality play experiences, several acknowledged individual constraints (i.e., safety concerns and parental resources) affecting the provision of play experiences. The final theme explores the instrumental means of children's activities, including play, in supporting learning and achievement.

4.5 Theme 4 The Agenda for Play: Activities Supporting Learning and Achievement

In discussions of children's activities, the participants referenced, through implicit or explicit means, individual and/or cultural goals tied to children's learning and achievement. "Learning" not only referred to the learning of academics, but also learning of other skills valued in the school-setting, including appropriate social behaviours and a range of skills (e.g., music, athletics) and also depended on the specific skills valued in particular communities. For example, for Debra, Katrina, and Evelyn, a focus on learning characterized "dominant" urban play culture in Canada and was associated with constraining play practices (i.e., modifying play behaviours). Debra stated:

Because I have two cultural lenses as well, I think part of the dominant culture is that play is structured and supervised, as you've mentioned, these days, and less of a focus on fun actually, more on learning... Whereas my husband, what he brings to the children, playtime, or my mother-in-law would influence when we were raising the children closer to her, and in rural Saskatchewan too, it's a little bit different where play is more about imagination and fun and a silliness, a goofiness, rather than a modification of behaviour.

Katrina added: "More on learning!"

Debra later contemplated a "competitiveness" driving the changes in play. She questioned the other focus group participants: "Do you think there's a competitiveness though too? Are we competing against other parents?" In response, Katrina speculated a focus on competitiveness was due to societal changes: "I just think it fits in with the world and the way the world is nowadays and it's just a different world and many things have changed." She also indicated the influence of her own personal beliefs and experiences, sharing: "There is definitely a cultural lens, but for me it's today's context and how I grew up." Evelyn, on the other hand, pointed out the increasing regulation of children's electronic media content displays "heavy-handed teaching through cartoons where they're teaching social roles and manners." She also noted the regulation of free play in school away from a focus on fun, hypothesizing that "[T]hey

probably had to curb what play looked like or people would have been trashing the schools.” Further, both Debra and Evelyn related the shifting learning agenda for play to changes in parenting and family trends. Debra made links to family size, sharing, “I think with fewer children there’s more riding on them. We think they’re more important than maybe previous generations were”, while Evelyn discussed the influence of parenting literature, stating: “Parenting books are all about how important the first three years and the norms that children experience then will be to them forever, right? So maybe now we’re more serious about what we would like them to experience.”

Evelyn discussed cultural expectations for learning and achievement endemic to only certain cultural communities in the same context. She referenced a study on school readiness conducted in two distinct local communities, stating: “[Organization] did a study on children’s school readiness and they found that children’s literacy and math scores were higher in east side neighborhoods, but their social skills were higher in west side neighbourhoods.” She interpreted this to mean that: “Maybe the early childhood education that focuses on kids playing with each other instead of coaching them towards school competencies is stronger.” Evelyn’s comment suggested a perceived emphasis on academic learning within her community in light of cultural concerns for school readiness.

In a separate focus group interview, Olivia and Ethan also recognized a focus on achievement within their *middle-class* community, which they related to their concern (as described in Theme 3) of the cultural trend of the displacement of free play by scheduled skill-building activities. Olivia shared:

But we’re so focussed on achievement that I think we’re also sending a bad message to kids that if you’re not doing something, it’s not valuable. If you’re not physically learning a skill or improving in some way. And that’s why I think we’re undervaluing play because we’re not articulating the social and developmental benefits of play for kids in those early years. Kids at three don’t need to know how to play a piano. They can learn that later.

Ethan perceived and disagreed with the *earlier is better* belief driving this cultural trend, stating:

I guess, currently though, I think a lot of parents get their kids involved into activities at a younger age...the earlier you get your kids into, supposedly the better. But I don't think that play is the type of play that benefit children as much as free play.

Participants who self-identified with backgrounds other than Canadian also commented on perceptions of cultural values and goals. For example, Martin who was originally from Mexico described the competitive nature of society, which led to a belief that certain kinds of play may serve as a context in which adults instill desirable values and goals (e.g., making friends, self-improvement). He described these beliefs in relation to his experience coaching a girls' sports team, sharing:

I put certain rules there, because my goal was not winning, really, it was that the girls were improving on themselves. So I think that made really good to team...with me, they [the girls] were good because they were not competing to others, they were competing to themselves. But putting certain goals into the play is the only way that we can reach the goals that we as society we want. If we let them play – just go play freely – they might be killing themselves...Everybody wants to win and that's what the society, now, is so competitive, right?"

Elizabeth and Vivian recognized a focus on learning and achievement in both Nigerian and Jamaican culture, respectively, which was related to early formal learning practices involving explicit instruction. Elizabeth described the stringent standards for learning in the Nigerian educational system, reporting:

We have a standard for every year of our kids. Coming from back home, at three years old, you should be writing the A-Z. You'll be writing uniquely on the line... 'Cause back home [in Nigeria], as young as 18 months, the child is already in school from 7:30 to 4:00 pm.

Similarly, Vivian reported: "I know back home [in Jamaica] a lot attention is paid to formal structured learning from as early as kids can write. I know my son was writing, doing worksheets from – he was probably three or four..."

While some participants experienced tension and reluctance to orient their children's activities to align with perceived overarching cultural trends, most nonetheless emphasized areas of development and related skills which are thought to lead to success in school and reinforced this type of learning and development through their interaction, high-levels of parental

engagement and provision of school-relevant activities in the home. To elaborate, all participants reported they engaged in parent-child play. Some specified its frequency; the comments of Debra, Janelle Erin, Elizabeth, and Annie suggested frequent joint play. For example, Elizabeth shared, “For us, it’s everyday, but by the time I need a break [I say], ‘OK, go play with you brother’...” Janelle referred to its “daily” occurrence, while Erin shared that it occurs as often as “before school, before they get on the bus and then when they get home.” Debra reported frequent play in the early years with waning involvement, stating: “I think I instigated a lot of play in the zero to three with both kids...and then after three, I want them to be more independent, but also life has gotten busier as time has gone on...” Annie reported she plays “all the time”, but later advocated a balance, stating: “We do play a lot together, but I do value being able to play independently.”

Exceptionally, Ethan, Olivia, and Katrina did not report frequent play and expressed the belief that their involvement as a play partner is not always appropriate. They each felt pressure to play with their children. Ethan commented: “Everyone says it’s good to get down on the floor and play with your kids and I do that, but I also think they need the time to play on their own.” Olivia added: “I don’t think it’s natural for an adult to play that much...I can for a little bit, but then I’m tapped out, this is not where my head is at. I think that’s what kids excel at and that’s how they’re developing.” Similarly, Katrina did not feel that her involvement was always beneficial, stating: “I guess I just always felt that play should be unstructured and if it wasn’t, then like I mentioned it’s the parent setting something up and I don’t always want to be involved or see it a bit as interfering.”

Parent-child play was most frequently discussed in relation to academic learning and/or cognitive development. For example, Elizabeth, Annie, and Janelle discussed school-themed parent-child play, wherein the adults organized the learning to motivate and impart school-related skills in the context of play. Elizabeth stated:

[T]he only way they actually give their all-out is when you put it as, ‘Come, let’s go play’... When you tell them to go play, for them it’s play, but for us, we know what we want them to actually learn... For me, I have an end goal to that writing. So that’s why I do [it].”

To this comment, Annie responded, “Let’s do the worksheets!” and Janelle added, “I’ll be the teacher, here’s your workbook.”

A common theme was the adult making a game out of everyday activities, in which the activity was adapted to the child's level and interest. For example, Bethany reported, "I'll play toys and try to come up with little games. I do trick them into work by making it a game" while Evelyn used "verbal play" to engage her daughter in routines, stating, "We engage in verbal play almost constantly...I say, 'It's time to go Joe, better get a move on'. We rhyme and then she speeds up and she doesn't even notice that she's been nagged." Erin turned homework into "home entertainment" through fun activities (e.g., making paper mâché planets) designed to reinforce academic concepts. She voiced, "We kind of turn it into play, so there isn't this idea that homework is a chore." The fellow focus group members responded enthusiastically; Janelle responded, "That's a good idea!" and Elizabeth added, "That's really neat."

Participants' descriptions of their style of involvement in play ranged from autonomous (child-led) to didactic (adult-led). Didactic means of parental involvement characterized descriptions of the cultural and/or household practices among the two participants who identified as Nigerian, Penelope and Elizabeth. For example, Penelope described a play activity in which she taught the content of a YouTube cartoon as a "step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means. That's the way we play, sometimes." Elizabeth described her agenda for her son's play, which contrasted with his own agenda. She shared:

Even for my son, if I say, "Okay, write down A – Z". "No, Mommy, come write". If Mommy doesn't trace it, he wouldn't do that. Or if Mommy doesn't hold the paper for him to write, he wouldn't do that. So for him that's play. For me, I have an end goal to that writing. So that's why I do.

Elizabeth and Penelope thus spoke of play as including goal-oriented activities with a step by step procedure. Vivian, as the sole outlier of the play as an instrument view, described play in Jamaican culture as separate from learning. She described teaching her son through traditional learning methods (i.e., rote repetition). She reflected:

That's foreign to me [learning through play] because I taught my son all of these things. I placed the things in his sight and I was repeating it and asking him to repeat it after me. So, I don't know, maybe there is some truth to that or some importance to that method.

Vivian questioned her beliefs, as demonstrated in her comment, to consider a stance more congruent with that of play as instrument in academic and/or cognitive learning. She elaborated:

I'm wondering if I kind of robbed him of playtime. Now he pays a lot of attention to the things that I want him to pay attention to. But it's interesting, perhaps if I get a second chance at this, I will focus more on the playing in the early years.

Parents who identified as Canadian described a preference for an autonomous style of parent-child play. For example, Annie described her son initiating their play interactions, sharing: "I do like playing with him too. It's really fun getting him to: 'Oh Mommy, come be the dump truck and I'll be the plane'." Olivia described responsive (as opposed to directive) interactions, sharing: "We respond to their inquiries as opposed to giving them a lesson." Bethany preferred her children's kindergarten's teacher's child-directed approach instead of a step-by-step approach, sharing:

She [the teacher] was excellent and really did a lot of experiential learning opportunities. So they had a garden in the classroom and did science by planting two different tomato seeds...and they would measure the plant and how it grows. And so, they would learn through that interaction. They were learning science and they were learning math, but it wasn't like, "You put these things together and this is how the plant grows" or "This is how you count and measure things."

Participants also commented on household learning activities, which, akin to play activities, were mostly designed to promote a defined set of school-relevant skills (i.e., academic and social skills) and to build knowledge about everyday concepts. These activities were most commonly academically-oriented and structured by an adult and/or learning materials (e.g., worksheets, books, media). Some participants (Bethany, Vivian, Martin, Penelope, Elizabeth) encouraged the use of educational electronic media for academic learning purposes. For example, Bethany shared: "I will say, 'You need to play this app'. I don't even know the name of it, but you drag letters and it makes the sound of the letters until you match it up." Vanessa responded, "Yes, I know exactly which game you're talking about." Vivian and Martin both reported using the same program targeted to preschool-aged children and referenced its potential to improve language skills. Vivian recalled that her son "would learn words" when he used it, while Martin reported its benefits for English language learning, sharing: "We use that one because he likes it. He's learning to make some noises now based on that." Vivian additionally reported her son's use of a website for academic learning, stating: "I have also used [website] where it's the same curriculum for the schools here."

Parents of school-aged children (Bethany, Janelle, Vivian, and Vanessa) commonly referenced reading and traditional methods of learning (i.e., structured academic-focussed activities such as worksheets). For example, Vivian reported: “I use worksheets, because that’s how I learned”, while Vanessa shared: “We read books and I have been making my son do worksheets.” Reading was also part of Janelle’s family activity repertoire. She shared: “We always try to structure some kind of form of Mom-Dad time whether it’s play or reading or playing a video game.” Bethany additionally described academic learning activities, such as book-reading as well as learning through song, sharing: “My son has nine letters to his name and to get him to learn how to spell it we made up a song” and “We make sure we read at night at least and sometimes during the day on the weekend, sometimes we do it in the morning.” Bethany also recalled that her son’s play with puzzles enabled him to “learn how things go together and how to manipulate the object.” Finally, Evelyn described science learning, sharing: “[W]e do physics problems every day. If she does those things, then she gets stickers on a chart...”

Annie, Debra and Penelope, parents of children under school age, listed early formal learning activities to prepare their toddlers for school. Annie was encouraging of her toddler’s emerging reading proficiency, sharing: “He’s starting to learn how to read now, which is good and I’d like to keep that going, because I was an early reader too.” She also provided early learning toys (i.e., wipe-off books) and demonstrated support for her son’s learning progress, stating: “[My son] will just scribble and go crazy on them. But other times, you can see him; he knows how to hold a pen properly and you can see him trying to trace the letter.” Debra described pre-literacy activities and outlined her role in supporting her daughter’s literacy development, reporting:

We’re working on some of those pre-literacy skills. We have those foam letters in the bathtub. Whether she’s calling them out or we’re flipping a letter for ‘cat’, we’re just at that stage...I know reading is important, so I’m going to support that in a really explicit way...

Penelope described two learning activities, helping her daughter with homework from extra-curricular foreign language lessons and teaching her children social skills from a cartoon series on YouTube. For example, she shared:

My daughter is learning Arabic. After school, she goes to the Arabic school to spend three hours between Monday and Thursdays...I have some knowledge about Arabic. So when she comes home with assignments and memorizations and we read it together. When she makes mistakes, I try to correct her. So during that period, if I make mistakes as well, she tries to correct me. So I gain more as well when I play with her.”

In common, all three mothers described their household learning activities as play. For example, Annie shared: “It’s kinda play for him [tracing letters on a wipe-off book], but I’m not super hardcore about it, because he’s only three”, while Debra asserted: “I don’t really see learning and play as two different things.” Penelope used the words *play* and *learning* interchangeably in her description of mother-child interactions, stating: “When you learn with them – when you play with them, you learn. You gain some things.”

Altogether, these participants’ accounts of household learning activities suggested that learning activities tended to be structured and academic-focussed. The focus group moderator noted this trend, stating: “I’m getting the sense that the activities you do in the home to help the children to learn are more structured activities.” In response, Martin, who had the youngest child of all 14 participants, asserted “not me.” He explained that “my kid is just two years, so there’s no real structure.” He promoted learning as progressing naturally without pressuring the child. He shared:

[M]e and my wife have decided that we don’t want to put too much pressure into him. So he does pretty much everything he wants. The only thing I try to push into him is the liking of sports, just because I think it’s really important for their development, right? ...So we’re just trying to do whatever he wants. My wife sometimes says, “We’re spoiling him.” But I don’t think so, I think kids will learn on their own time.

This prompted Bethany to add another unstructured activity designed to target non-academic or cognitive skills. She felt that home obstacle courses are “definitely learning activities that we do in a form of play” and specified, “So, not necessarily, knowledge-learning like learning facts, but physical movement skills is something we try to work on a lot. So they can just run, jump, skip, hop.”

The participants (i.e., Katrina, Evelyn, Olivia, Ethan, Annie, Vanessa, Bethany) (self-identifying Canadians) also discussed parent-child conversations, a learning activity that facilitated knowledge acquisition and/or modelled behaviours. In terms of the former, several

participants described conversations with their children centered on facilitating knowledge through modes of teaching, sharing and/or questioning about school-related concepts. Annie commented that she engaged in teacher-like questioning when co-viewing television programs with her son. She reported: “We ask [my son] questions like, ‘How do you think he’s feeling?’ or ‘What colour is that?’...” Bethany, Olivia, and Ethan focused on a child-led approach to teaching concepts. Bethany shared, “We’ll just have a discussion: ‘Oh, what do you know? Did you learn about this in school?’ And then, they can share their learning with me. So it’s a reverse teaching opportunity.” Olivia stated, “We respond to their inquiries as opposed to giving them a lesson...[H]e wants to know about butterflies, then we explain it.” Olivia and Ethan reported unstructured child-led activities in the home, which fit the child’s nature. Olivia shared these activities are emphasized “because that’s the way it’s working out, he [the child] is very inquisitive.” Finally, Vanessa described a combined adult-led and child-led approach. She shared that she facilitates knowledge her son encounters in everyday life and/or during structured outings:

[W]hen we go outside, I try to do things like point out, “Oh, this is this type of plant” and try to bridge things. If he is talking about something - how the soil – “OK, what do I know about soil?” and talk about it and earthworms or how I can bring knowledge into it and teach him something... We went to [historical site], so we were talking about how in 1800s they used to live here and this is what they did. It’s just trying to take what they’re doing and then see what from my knowledge I can teach them.

For Katrina and Evelyn, a second focus of parent-child conversations was the learning of social behaviours. Katrina mentioned engaging her children in conversations centered on daily routines, sharing: “I can identify some learning activities: homework, household tasks, going over the day and learning from that”, while Evelyn mentioned “we talk about manners.”

Lastly, some participants (Vanessa, Elizabeth, Janelle, Penelope, Annie) also described structured non-play activities in the school and home setting for instilling appropriate behaviours and conduct. It is difficult to estimate, however, the exact number of parents who advocated these type of activities, given broad conceptualizations of play among many parents to include structured activities. For example, Penelope and Vanessa discussed the value of learning through electronic media. Penelope mentioned a play activity in which she using electronic media as a medium to teach socially-appropriate behaviours, sharing:

There are series – when they are taught how to relate with each other, when they are taught how to accommodate friends and the like. So, sometimes I pause, maybe when the statement is made. I try to explain, “OK, this is what they meant. This is how it should be, this is how it shouldn’t be.” So, we keep playing it as I go. It’s a step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means. That’s the way we play, sometimes.

Vanessa voiced a preference for this type of electronic media content, although she monitored children’s media time, reporting:

I’m trying – “No, I don’t want you on the TV” or we’re limiting it...For me, some of the shows are really good. They do teach the kids – I do like Peppa Pig too, because I think they are polite and nice...There are certain ones I won’t let my kids watch at all... “I don’t want you to pick up those bad behaviours from it.”

As a final example concerning structured non-play activities, Janelle expressed the value of “structured learning time” because “you don’t want a wild child who can’t come into the classroom...” According to Janelle, learning proper social conduct, a valuable skill in school-settings, was not assumed to be learned through unstructured play.

In the final theme, participants described instrumental means of supporting children in learning and achievement through school-relevant activities associated with a high degree of parental involvement (e.g., structuring of activity, providing tools) and varying means of engagement. Together, these interrelating patterns are consistent with an overall cultural concern for school success, which participants adopted in their play practices and beliefs to various degrees.

4.6 Summary

Each participant shared their personal and family play experiences, which exposed beliefs about play and its role in development. Their accounts revealed four major themes: (1) The Nature of Play: Dominant, Divergent, and Diverse Conceptualizations ; (2) The Value of Play: Developmental Benefit in Six Key Areas; (3) The Decline of Play: Constraints to Play Opportunities; (4) The Agenda for Play: Activities Supporting Learning and Achievement. The themes are distinct, yet woven together they create a meaningful picture of the data. Parents offered both differing and overlapping conceptualizations of play, which determined the range of activities considered play, and by extension, the developmental areas thought to be influenced by

various forms of play. Although parents valued play, or at the very least a mix of play and other (structured) activities, as instrumental in achieving locally-valued goals of learning and achievement, they reported facing both unique and shared obstacles to play provision. Together, these patterns appear to produce a diverse range of play experiences for children to which parents attributed value and which adapted to the demands and opportunities for play within their specific communities. The next and final chapter discusses this study's findings in relation to existing literature, practical implications of the findings, strengths of the current study, and areas for future research.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to examine the cultural perspectives and developmental assumptions of play among parents within the specific context of the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Each participant described their conceptualizations of play, including definitions and activities considered play. They also described the perceived role of play in development. This chapter reviews and summarizes the main findings of the study and connects the findings to the theoretical framework and to related research literature. Limitations and recommendations for future research, implications for practice, and strengths of the current study are also outlined.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The objective of the current study was to provide clarity on parental perceptions of children's play, which will contribute to the knowledge base about children's play and development among families of diverse backgrounds in the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The experiences of the fourteen participants in regards to their children's play were captured with quotes and illustrated in four major themes.

In the first theme, *The Nature of Play: Dominant, Divergent, and Diverse Conceptualizations*, the participants discussed the nature of play, including personal and cultural definitions of play and the activities which they considered play. The majority of participants espoused a broad view of play, recognizing both unstructured (e.g., jumping on the trampoline) and structured forms (e.g., baking with parent). Yet among these participants, there was a lack of consensus related to the categorization of two activities in particular as play or non-play: (1) organized skill-based activities (e.g., soccer) and (2) electronic media. Two married participants

(Ethan and Olivia) who identified as Canadian held divergent and relatively narrow views of play as unstructured, which they felt opposed the dominant, broad views of play in their middle-class Canadian culture. Finally, three participants of diverse non-Canadian backgrounds, Vivian, Elizabeth, and Penelope, also viewed play as both unstructured and structured. They discussed traditional beliefs about play and expressions of children's play (i.e., unstructured or structured) as inextricably linked to the setting (e.g., indoor, school) in which the activity arises. Unlike participants who identified as Canadian, three participants (Elizabeth, Penelope, Martin) spoke of a necessity for a goal-oriented nature of structured play activities. Elizabeth and Penelope, participants originally from Nigeria, identified goals related to academic and social skill learning, as when Elizabeth commented, "I have an end goal to that writing". They discussed structured play with adults within household and/or dominant cultural practices as encompassing didactic play activities (e.g., learning appropriate behaviours displayed in videos through parent's step-by-step teaching) geared toward these goals. Elizabeth referred to a play-learning paradox, in which play was in fact a context for academic learning purposes to the parents (an agenda not shared by the children), whereas Penelope did not. Vivian, originally from Jamaica, initially conceptualized play as separate from learning and focussed on the pleasurable characteristics of play. She commented: "My perspective of play is fun activities that just allow you to relax. Just to enjoy being together as a family or even by yourself." Her beliefs evolved to consider the learning through play discourse over the course of her focus group interview.

In the second theme, *The Value of Play: Developmental Benefit in Six Key Areas*, the participants discussed the developmental value of their children's play. Overall, the findings indicated positive perceptions of play as a natural, developmentally-appropriate childhood activity. Beliefs about the developmental value of play were linked to six key areas: (1) intrapersonal; (2) socio-emotional, (3) cognitive; (4) physical; (5) language; (6) career and economic. The developmental areas referenced by the largest number of participants were socio-emotional (11) and cognitive development (10). Participants who identified as Canadian (i.e., Annie, Evelyn, Debra, Erin, Ethan, Olivia, Janelle) held an emphasis on the value of play in emotional aspects of socio-emotional development (i.e., emotional regulation and persistence) as did Martin, who identified as Mexican, given no mention from the three participants of Nigerian or Jamaican backgrounds. Linking the participants' related comments was a conviction in the far-reaching benefits of play; the everyday play in childhood was believed to grant the later

ability to succeed in adulthood tasks. Canadian parents held a unique emphasis on cognitive areas of development (i.e., organization and exploration of ideas) with all but one participant referencing the domain (Janelle, Annie, Erin, Bethany, Olivia, Ethan, Debra, Evelyn, Vanessa). However, Vivian, a participant who identified as originally from Jamaica revised her beliefs to consider the value of play in the area of cognitive development upon encountering the beliefs of fellow participants over the course of her focus group interview. Both Penelope and Elizabeth, the two participants originally from Nigeria, described the benefits of play in overlapping areas of social, physical, and language development, and uniquely linked play to career and economic development. Additionally, participants generally assumed children are able advance developmentally in play without parental intervention or guidance, as reflected in comments' endorsing solitary or collaborative peer play. Yet they nonetheless recognized their own ability to support play (e.g., through providing resources, allocating playtime, parent-child play, teaching). For example, Janelle spoke of providing play opportunities: "I like to try to expose my children to anything and everything."

Discussions of play in ECE revealed its developmental importance, according to four participants, in children's socio-emotional development, including effective social interactions (Elizabeth, Janelle, Annie, Olivia) and emotional-regulation (Annie). For example, Olivia believed peer play fosters the skill of integrating and participating in groups when she expressed that: "If his little buddies are dancing to the song, he would potentially partake in that. Versus if I was there, he would potentially use me as a shield or a comfort as opposed to trying new things." In addition, Elizabeth spoke of play in ECE as promoting language development. She recalled, "When he got to the daycare, I think he found other kids talking and then he learned from them." Annie alluded to the value of ECE in physical development when she shared: "I noticed that my son's gross motor skills have gotten so much better since he started at daycare just because I guess they can do more stuff than I did at home."

Debra and Bethany referenced the importance of ECE for stimulating aspects of cognitive development through the depiction of a guided play pedagogy. For example, Debra commented: They would be given a cardboard and they'd be given those binder clips. And the children with their little tiny fingers would have to figure out how to open the binder clips and put them around the cardboard. At first, they would be shown to do that one way and they would kind of make an effort. But from there, whatever the kids wanted to do next.

Evelyn also valued both the parent and teacher role as more directly influencing play, sharing: “I think the idea of giving educational tools and teaching can be supporting their play as well.” These three participants thus depicted the teacher’s role as significant in stimulating learning and development in a variety of ways (e.g., planning activities, scaffolding, teaching).

The third theme, *The Decline of Play: Constraints to Play Opportunities*, indicates the limitations to children’s freedom to play in home, community and educational settings. Two major play trends were identified within the diverse cultures represented in the study: (1) the over-scheduling and over-structuring of children (e.g., over-structured nature of team sports), and (2) the curtailing of play according to standards for behaviour set by religious and/or cultural communities (e.g., being “vigilant” in children’s play with the opposite gender). Most participants demonstrated concern for these changes, focusing on the threat to play in its “true sense” (Katrina) (i.e., unstructured play). For others, however, the same changes were associated with positive outcomes for children’s development and growth (i.e., learning of social, moral and/or religious values). Finally, several participants described their own individual challenges which affected their provision of play opportunities. These included limited resources (i.e., finances, responsibilities, time), perceptions of certain forms of play (i.e., physical play, free play, indoor play) as dangerous, and stresses (e.g., safety concerns, concerns for noise levels in apartment buildings) related to urban living.

Finally, the fourth theme, *The Agenda for Play: Activities Supporting Learning and Achievement*, participants discussed cultural and/or individual values and goals of learning and achievement. This was a common theme across the narratives of participants, regardless of cultural background. Participants emphasized areas of development and related skills thought to lead to success in school and reinforced this type of learning and development through their interaction, high-levels of engagement and provision of school-relevant activities in the home. For example, as Debra expressed, “I know reading is important, so I’m going to support that in a really explicit way”. Such activities comprised a range of either child-led or adult-led play and learning activities with the common thread being their school-relevancy. The participants described both varied means of interaction with their children. Of note, Penelope and Vivian, who were originally from Nigeria, emphasized structured play involving didactic means within household and/or cultural practices. Penelope, for example, described her teaching of a YouTube cartoon as a “step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means.”

Participants who self-identified as Canadian uniquely reported engaging verbally in ways which teachers might with children (e.g., teacher-like questioning, social conversations). Annie described an adult-led (involving a predetermined set of knowledge) conversation, sharing: “We ask Alex questions like, ‘How do you think he’s feeling?’ or ‘What colour is that?’...” Olivia, Ethan, and Bethany’s comments portrayed a child-led approach which allowed the child to initiate conversation. For example, Olivia shared, “We respond to their inquiries as opposed to giving them a lesson...” Participants self-identifying as Canadian also described unstructured play with a preference for an autonomous style of involvement, although some described at times teaching or facilitating knowledge during this type of play. For example, Evelyn expressed, “I taught her about the rule of improv, where you never say no when you’re playing. You say, ‘yes’ and accommodate other people’s ideas”.

Finally, Annie and Janelle appeared to advocate practices striking a balance between play and non-play structured learning activities (e.g., teacher-led activities). As Janelle expressed: “[A] balance between play and structured learning time is key.” However, the exact number of participants who shared this view is difficult to discern, as many parents encouraged types of ‘play’ which are not currently supported in the play literature, such as structured or extrinsically-motivated activities. Debra, for example, shared, “whether it’s art or baking together, those are play and learning moments too”, while Penelope endorsed an activity co-viewing and teaching electronic media as play.

5.2 Integration of Findings with Existing Literature

As expected, the findings of the current study were consistent with the existing body of literature on parents’ perceptions of children’s play. Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy (2007) found in their case studies of three separate cultural contexts that, “Play is culturally-structured according to different childrearing beliefs, values, and practices.” The current study revealed the culturally-structured nature of play according to an ethnically-diverse group of parents, comprised of parents self-identifying as Canadian, Jamaican, Nigerian, and Mexican. The major themes identified were congruent overall with research focused on European-American middle-class parental perceptions of play and its role in development, in addition to research in Western contexts on the trends and changes affecting the nature of children’s play, and cultural agendas for play. The level of congruency between the findings of the current study regarding the beliefs and experiences of participants of diverse cultures is difficult to discern due to the limited body

of literature on the topic involving these parenting groups (Roopnarine, 2011). Potential connections to the extant literature are explored, but generalization should not be assumed, especially when considering issues of cultural and social class issues (Roopnarine, Lasker, Sacks, & Stores, 1998).

5.2.1 **Theme 1 The nature of play: Dominant, divergent, and diverse conceptualizations.**

Fisher et al. (2008) compared the play views of middle-class American mothers' beliefs of play and child development experts' beliefs of play. The researchers found that the mothers rated a broad range of activities as play, which the authors defined as "unstructured, imaginary behaviours to structured, goal-oriented activities" (p. 305). The dominant view, as espoused by the majority of participants (all Canadian mothers) in the current study, indicated parallel views, yet the mothers did not explicitly acknowledge a goal-oriented nature of structured play activities. This was surprising given some activities appeared to be designed with goals (e.g., school readiness) in mind, such as when Bethany shared, "And you have to cut it out, so you practice cutting with scissors...But there's no real goals". Some comments also reflected a loose distinction between structured and free play. For example, Evelyn described doing household chores with her daughter as "free, structured kind of play". Participants additionally indicated new forms of structured 'play', which have been documented in Western play cultures (i.e., electronic media play, organized activities) (Elkind, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Fisher et al. (2008) documented mother's similar perceptions of structured play, noting that this category of play is not currently supported in the theoretical or empirical literature. The experts in Fisher et al.'s (2008) study, on the other hand, rated structured activities as non-play and attributed less developmental value to the activity, thus congruent with the divergent views of a minority of parents who identified as Canadian in the current study.

Comments about cultural and personal conceptualizations of play according to parents from Jamaica and Nigeria denoted, at times, a play work dichotomy in which there is a clear separation of 'play' from 'work'. As Vivian shared, "it's a juxtaposition – work or play?" Researchers have noted that such a philosophy characterizes notions of play among play stakeholders in colonized countries, including Jamaica (Chevannes, 2006) as well as Nigeria (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016). In these countries, schooling was historically utilized as a means of upward mobility and play was not factored as part of this repertoire (Chevannes, 2006;

Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2016). By early 2000s, beliefs of play as an instrument of early learning dominated the curricula in Western nations, and had only just begun to infiltrate the curricula of former colonies (Brooker, 2017). Play has had little purchase in colonized, less privileged nations, a consideration which may then help partly account for some of the play conceptualizations of parents from immigrant backgrounds in this study. This includes the belief that there is a time and place for play (e.g., when work is completed, when outdoors), as reflected in Elizabeth's comment, who shared: "In Nigeria, we define play as just being outside; getting dirty, getting sweaty." The second belief relates to a goal-oriented structure in certain forms of play, as reflected in Martin's comment that "[I]f we want to get the goals that we want to get from play, we need to put some structure to that. We need to put some goals into it." Finally, the third belief is that learning does not occur in play or learning may occur in play, but specifically in 'structured play' involving adults, as captured in Vivian's reflection. She shared "So perhaps there is some value to this play in terms of learning. I never thought of it before until now." The role of the adult in play, such as deciding goals for play, may also relate to the findings of Fasoli (2014)'s study, wherein 54% of Latino American parents referenced learning through play as related to parental contributions as compared to only 20% of Euro-American parents.

5.2.2 Theme 2 The value of play: Developmental benefits in six key areas

Roopnarine (2011) argued that the wide-ranging beliefs about the benefits of play fall along a continuum, which may be helpful in describing the participants' responses in the current study. At one end of the continuum were parents who identified the scholastic benefits of play. The responses of the ten participants who identified as Canadian overall suggest alignment on this end. For example, Vanessa advocated learning through play in elementary school, sharing: "[H]e would learn so much better having more time to play and kind of digest it in that way as opposed to, "Here's the worksheets, get to work." The vast majority mentioned links between play and areas of cognitive development and socio-emotional learning, congruent with the strong focus on these areas for middle-class European-American parents as documented in the scientific literature (e.g., Colliver, 2016; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2008). For example, Janelle mentioned social skills important for getting along with peers in the school environment, sharing: "[I]f they're playing with another child and they're having a sword fight, they're learning things about that other child; he doesn't like it when I do that or he thinks it's funny when I do this."

In the middle are parents who may acknowledge particular benefits of play, but prefer academic activities for learning purposes. The beliefs of three mothers in the current study, two self-identifying as Nigerian and one Jamaican, suggest alignment in the middle. In terms of perceived benefits of play, Elizabeth described the traditional definition of play in Nigerian culture play as primarily a physical activity, stating: “In Nigeria, we define play as just being outside; getting dirty, getting sweaty.” However, she also described, akin to the second participant identifying as Nigerian, Penelope, additional overlapping developmental benefits of indoor play. She shared, “For my son...when he got to the daycare, I think he found other kids talking and then he learned from them [imitates child talk]”. Penelope and Elizabeth both identified play as a vehicle for career and economic development (in addition to social, physical and language development), consistent with Ogunyemi and Ragpot’s (2016) assertion in their review of ECE in Nigeria that “the drive for early formal learning is strong and the view for economic development as the source of this drive is unabated” (p.6). The third participant, Vivian, who was originally from Jamaica, reworked her conceptualization of play over the course of the focus group to consider additional potential benefits (i.e., social and cognitive). The beliefs of Martin, from Mexico, also suggested alignment in the middle. He valued play in four developmental areas (socio-emotional, intrapersonal, language, and physical) and also identified the benefits of play in school to aid, most importantly, in children’s well-being, stating: “Finland is using that method of play and it seems to working good for them in terms of education. But I think the most important part is it’s working for them in terms of happiness for the people”. Altogether, these four views aligned with the assertion of Roopnarine et al. (2003) that in some immigrant societies, parents are just beginning to identify play as an important developmental activity as opposed to a physical activity. This has already been demonstrated in studies investigating the acculturating play beliefs of immigrant groups (e.g., Cote & Bornstein, 2005; Roopnarine, 2011).

Roopnarine (2011) asserted that parents in the middle demonstrate preference for academic activities or see play as a “window to jump-start academic preparedness” (Lancy, 2007, p. 279). Cognizant of the dominant ideas of play as pivotal in school readiness and social adjustment, parents espousing such beliefs may view play as enjoyable, but nonetheless prefer academic activities or, at the least, a combination of academic and play activities (Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). In the current study, Vivian, Elizabeth, and Penelope valued play, but also

emphasized academic activities for learning purposes and/or described cultural or personal play practices include didactic ‘play’ activities. Altogether such beliefs align with previous studies involving cultural groups residing in the United States including low-income Caucasian, African American and Latina mothers (Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Piérola, 1995) and middle-class Asian mothers (Parmar, Harkness, & Super 2004). Perceptions of play falling in the middle group may also relate to reliance on traditional methods of learning (e.g., rote learning, memorization) thought to educate children among groups outside of North-American and Europe (Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015).

Thirdly, at the opposite end are parents who view play as merely a natural activity. There were no participants in this study representing this end, given all formulated various links between play and development.

5.2.3 Theme 3 The decline of play: Constraints to children’s opportunities to play.

Participants expressed distinct concerns about the state of children’s play based on the realities of their communities. For example, parents self-identifying as middle-class held concerns of over-structuring children’s time to the detriment of independent playtime. For example, Ethan shared:

I guess, currently though, I think a lot of parents get their kids involved into activities at a younger age...the earlier you get your kids into, supposedly the better. But I don’t think that play is the type of play that benefit children as much as free play.

The play literature has effectively documented a trend of over-structuring of children’s time worldwide (Singer et al., 2009), which is thought to more greatly affect children from higher income urban communities (Lillard, 1989). Previous studies have shown that American parents especially have concerns of scheduling time for stimulating activities while protecting their children from too much busyness, as demonstrated in DeCaro and Worthman’s (2007) study of urban American preschool parents. On the other hand, in the current study, a parent in this study originally from Nigeria spoke of a daily academic-focused extracurricular activity for her kindergarten child without mentioning any negative impact on the child’s playtime. She shared:

My daughter is learning Arabic. After school, she goes to the Arabic school to spend three hours between Monday and Thursdays...I have some knowledge about Arabic. So when she comes home with assignments and memorizations and we read it together.

When she makes mistakes, I try to correct her. So during that period, if I make mistakes as well, she tries to correct me. So I gain more as well when I play with her.”

This example reiterates research showing that adults constrain or support certain activities to facilitate development of culturally-valued skills (e.g., learning a language, relational skills), which may serve an adaptive function in achieving goals set out for children within a specific cultural community (Bornstein, 2012; Rogoff, 2003).

The parents in this study held a divided stance about the state of play and/or other activities in educational institutions. Vanessa, for example, mentioned that play is compromised in elementary school, sharing, “I don’t think they have enough [play]...it seems like it’s *a lot* of schoolwork”. Conversely, Janelle advocated structured learning at the early elementary level, asserting: “[A] balance between play and structured learning time is key”. The tug-of-war over adult agendas for children’s activities—one which prioritizes academic standards and didactic methods of primary school and the other which endorses the non-academic and developmental kindergarten activities (e.g., play)—have been documented and raised concern amongst play researchers (Dombkowski, 2001; Peterson, Forsyth, & McIntyre, 2015).

Another major constraint discussed among parents in this study was the curtailing of children’s play according to cultural standards of behaviour. Parents discussed implicit guidelines for the expression of play. The finding supports the notion of play as a vehicle for socialization, in which children learn about roles, societal conventions, rules, and relationships (Bennet, Wood & Rogers, 1997) through interaction with adults (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, parents discussed the importance of “reining-in play” (i.e., physical play or free play) in certain contexts. As Katrina shared, “I don’t like if there’s no parent around. I don’t like them to be involved in some physical activities. I guessed I’m scared of something happening and no adult around.” This aligns with an Eastern Canadian study, in which Lehrer and Petrakos (2012) found that some of the parents within a mixed-ethnicity group (majority European backgrounds) disapproved of rough-and-tumble play.

Finally, a major shared challenge to play provision among participants in this study related to the urban context in which they all resided. As Lester and Russell (2010) outlined in their review, increasing urbanization worldwide and associated environmental stressors in modern life carry a range of negative impacts on children’s play experiences. For example, as Vivian said of her son’s outdoor play, “No matter how old and where he is going to play, one of

us will be behind him to check to see whether or not everything is alright. So I guess it's maybe safety...". The participants' safety concerns due to perceptions of danger in the urban environment and their subsequent constraining behaviours (i.e., supervision) corroborates the extant findings involving parenting groups in urban, modern societies (e.g., Kytta, 2004; Prezza, 2007).

5.2.4 Theme 4 The agenda for play: Activities supporting learning and achievement.

The participants in this study referenced individual and/or cultural goals of learning and achievement for their children. For example, Olivia shared: "We're so focussed on achievement that I think we're also sending a bad message to kids that if you're not doing something, it's not valuable. If you're not physically learning a skill or improving in some way." Empirical and theoretical work (Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2008; Rogoff et al., 1993; Roopnarine, 2011) has suggested that among parenting groups in technologically-advanced societies, certain child-focused activities (i.e., parent-child play and verbal interaction) serve to "groom children for success in academic settings and eventual participation in the information economy" (Lancy, 2007, p.20). Parents in the current study were surveyed regarding these activities. All parents reported engaging in parent-child play with their children, an endorsement which is consistent with Roopnarine and Davidson's (2015) assertion that parent-child play is not solely a product of educated, middle-class cultures. Participants described differing styles of parent-child play, however, notably didactic (step-by-step, procedural) versus autonomous (children's initiative to play, autonomy-supportive style). Studies have revealed that parent-child play styles differ across cultures and reflect economic status, culturally-distinct socialization practices, and adherence to traditional methods of learning thought to educate children in non-Western societies (Holloway et al., 1995; Keller, Borke, Chaudhary, Lamm, & Kleis, 2010; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015). For example, Annie described her son initiating play with her: "I do like playing with him too. It's really fun getting him to: 'Oh Mommy, come be the dump truck and I'll be the plane.'" On the other hand, two mothers, originally from Nigeria, spoke of structured play activities involving a didactic style of parental engagement occurring in household and/or cultural practices. As Penelope stated, play is "a step-by-step procedure so that they can understand what it really means." They related this to cultural ways of educating children prominent in Nigeria, which rely on traditional methods of learning adopted from the British system of education. The majority of parents who identified as Canadian in the current study also

reported engagement with children in structured play activities (e.g., science experiments, reading or everyday activities in a game format which may or may not involve teaching). Researchers have noted that affluent North-American parents teach children that everything in life is a game—an interaction which might not be afforded to families in less affluent societies (Brooker, 2017).

In regards to other activities, many Canadians also described engaging children in social conversations (e.g., about manners), a school-oriented activity which has been documented among middle-class parenting groups (e.g., Tudge et al., 2006; Rogoff et al., 2003). None of the four participants who immigrated to Canada in the study, however, mentioned such conversations with children. Conclusions based on this finding cannot be made, given the small number of participants, the relatively young age of one participant's child (two years), and/or the need for more focused research concerning the cultural ways of communicating across cultural groups residing in the Canadian context.

It also appears that certain structured non-play activities which a minority of parents (i.e., organized play, teacher-led activities) endorsed compete for a place in children's lives against free play and other child-centered activities. For example, when Olivia discussing choosing a daycare for her children with other parents, she felt "You're often comparing what kind of activities they get to do in the day: 'Oh, our kids get to go on field trips' ...it's almost like we're placing more value on the institutions that provide less free time to play." Olivia's comment reiterates extant research findings concerning a trend towards the increasingly structured lives of children worldwide (Singer et al., 2009).

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The four major themes identified in the current study illustrate that children's play arises not as an isolated event, but is rather situated in a sociocultural context. The results of this research are thus compatible with sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). When applied to the study of children's play, sociocultural theory seeks to understand how the context of a community shapes children's play in addition to the range of beliefs about the value of play and the instantiation of these values into children's play (Göncü et al., 2006; Rogoff, 2003).

One of Vygotsky's (1978) main theoretical contributions, as outlined in his theory of cognitive development, purports that children operate in a zone of proximal development and they are able to perform beyond their developmental levels through co-constructed interactions.

The parents in the present study described their children advancing developmentally in play through co-constructed interactions with their culturally-structured environment (involving cultural tools and members). By making contributions ranging from merely providing resources to explicitly teaching knowledge of everyday concepts, the parents saw their own involvement as important to the zone of proximal development.

Rogoff (1990, 2003) expanded on the notion of ZPD with her concept of guided participation, which represents the interpersonal plane of development. She outlined the importance of examining children's learning as "transformation of participation in cultural activities" involving three mutually-constituting processes (personal, interpersonal and cultural). In line with Rogoff's (1990, 2003) theory, the participants' narratives revealed cultural similarities and differences in terms of how guided participation occurs within each of their respective communities. A major difference was evident in the arrangements between children and their parents, such as constraints and available resources. For example, while some participants described sending children unaccompanied to the park or a neighbour's house, others were reluctant to do so out of safety concerns. A major similarity relates to the urban, technologically-advanced context in which the study took place. Children were afforded similar means of participation in the school-setting and thus separated from mature adult activities (e.g., work) and provided particular school-relevant materials (e.g., books, electronic media, blocks, coloring supplies) and experiences (e.g., field trips to historical site, teacher-like questioning). Fittingly, parents described implicit or explicit means of orienting children toward common goals of learning and achievement. Evelyn, for example, described an activity to supplement school instruction. She shared: "[W]e do physics problems every day. If she does those things, then she gets stickers on a chart...." While these goals were apparent in each focus group, participants came with diverse experiences in cultural institutions of learning and therefore held a diverse set of values and ideas about optimal development. Participants' narratives therefore demonstrated differing coherences of cultural practices in function of achieving locally-valued goals. For example, Elizabeth described the emphasis on early formal learning in Nigerian culture through traditional methods (e.g., worksheets). She also expressed value of play as the initial training ground for the child's future career and identified specific play activities (i.e., didactic parent-child play) which are thought to educate children in Nigeria. As a group, some coherence of cultural practices emerged among parents who identified as Canadian, likely given

the majority belong to a middle-class cultural group. These parents endorsed learning through diverse forms of play (e.g., unstructured play and/or structured play) and a wide range of developmental functions of play. For example, Annie conceptualized play to include all activities involving “learning and discovering” and made links to the value of play in five of the six key areas of development, excluding only career and economic development. Importantly, they made associations with play and complex cognitive skills (e.g., creativity). The focus on play aligns with Vygotskian theory, wherein dramatic play occupies a special place by promoting abstract thought (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). The shifting beliefs of one participant originally from Jamaica to consider play’s potential in fostering cognitive skills upon encountering the beliefs of fellow focus group participants further suggests that Vygotskian ideas of play underlie the beliefs of parents who identified as Canadian in this study.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that the Vygotskian legacy of play as the leading developmental activity pervades the perceptions of this sample of Canadian parents in particular. However, the findings suggested that such a constructivist developmental perspective of play may not be representative of the diversity of parents’ play perspectives. Rogoff’s (2003) sociocultural theory was helpful in accounting for different perspectives of development, which is necessary considering the diversity of conditions for children’s development and their everyday activities. Finally, a central tenet of sociocultural theory is that children themselves contribute to their own development (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). While the findings of this study focus on the parent perspective, it is noteworthy that participants mentioned many ways in which children structure their own activities (e.g., personality, age, motivation, needs, eliciting adult playfulness), which in turn shaped adults’ play beliefs and practices. In addition to offering partial support for the proposed theoretical model, these findings have important implications for practice for researchers, educators, and parents.

5.4 Implications for Practice

The study presented a qualitative description of the ways that parents perceive play and its role in development in the home, school, and community settings. There are several implications worthy of consideration in light of the findings of this study, which are relevant to researchers, school professionals, policymakers and curriculum developers, who seek to provide a level playing field of opportunity and experiences for children of diverse families.

Implications for researchers related to two findings of the current study: (1) Parents face both unique (i.e., safety concerns, parental resources) and shared obstacles related to the urban living (e.g., perceptions of danger) to the provision of play within their communities, in spite of a value for play; and (2) Parents discussed practices which indicate they have the agency to either constrain (e.g., over-supervision) or facilitate play (e.g., allocating uninterrupted playtime) relative to the demands and the opportunities of their specific communities. These findings highlight the need for researchers to develop targeted, culturally-relevant parenting interventions to enhance children's play experiences. This is further supported by assertions of sociocultural researchers speculating the important developmental impact of play in Western culture considering it is a "highly frequent, highly complex, and highly valued activity of young children" (Göncü & Gaskins, 2006, p.13). Successful interventions should account for parental beliefs about play and development, including concerns and priorities for children's play, and seek to understand specific challenges to play provision. The participants' comments also provided insights on the importance of culturally-specific and society-wide goals in shaping parental belief-systems and practices. For example, Olivia identified goals of achievement as motivating non-play practices within her middle-class community, sharing:

But we're so focussed on achievement that I think we're also sending a bad message to kids that if you're not doing something, it's not valuable. If you're not physically learning a skill or improving in some way. And that's why I think we're undervaluing play because we're not articulating the social and developmental benefits of play for kids in those early years.

Play intervention should embrace both individual and overarching societal goals for children, a recommendation which is also in line with past research involving an ethnically-diverse group of low-income mothers in the United States (Holloway et al., 1995), which demonstrated that parents are receptive to information from experts or childcare professionals when these perspectives furthered their own goals for their children.

There are important implications for school professionals. This study showed both variation and similarities within and across cultural groups regarding beliefs about play, learning, and development. It is important not to generalize according to the cultural group and to remember that Western explanations or theories do not necessarily apply to all children. School professionals should consult parents about activities at home and the way parents raise and play

with their children, which will help them recognize that children enter the classroom having been exposed different beliefs about play and learning. One child, for example, may have been taught that everything from household chores to physics is a game and perceive classroom activities accordingly. Another child, however, may perceive classroom activities as serious learning time, based on teachings that there is a time and place for play. Rather than adopting a deficit view, it is vital for school professionals to take into account the child's background when examining the child's development.

The final implication concerns the possible policy changes which have the potential to ameliorate children's play experiences in school settings. In their analysis of kindergarten curricula across five Canadian provinces, Peterson et al. (2016) outlined four recommendations for curriculum and policy development in Canada. These included: (1) Include a conceptual framework that reflects a more nuanced, less homogeneous conception of play including ability, cultural, economic, gender, and social class differences. Documents also need to make references to play more explicitly and, ideally, emphasize the role of play across the grades and across the life span (see, e.g., Huizinga, 1955); (2) Make more explicit the importance of the role of play not only to children's learning but also to their social and emotional growth; (3) Provide more examples of activities that are not linked to curricular outcomes, in other words, promote play for the sake of play, in addition to play in the service of measurable academic outcomes (e.g., Sutton-Smith, 1997); (4) Explicitly recognize the socio-cultural nature of play, acknowledging that conceptualizations of play will vary across the rich diversity of cultural and geographical contexts in Canada (Göncü et al., 1999). Given the focus on parental perspectives, the findings of the current study confirm the relevancy and saliency of the fourth recommendation in particular. Specifically, a rich diversity of play beliefs was generated within the four focus group interviews in this study. Parents themselves referred to the importance of their geographical and cultural background in influencing their play beliefs and practices, such as when Vivian described educational practices in her home country of Jamaica and made links to her own educational practices in her household. Understanding this diversity of beliefs is vital to avoid imposing mono-cultural ideas about play and development in educational institutions, which in turn may disadvantage the children of parents of diverse backgrounds.

Upon completion of the current study, I realize that the findings provided me with surprises and learning opportunities which have important implications for my own professional

practice in schools and with other educational professionals in my community. I recognize that the literature review provided me with a limited scope on the diversity of play beliefs, especially regarding recently immigrated parenting groups in Western contexts. I had also not anticipated the broad range of activities participants might consider play, from running around to cooking with mom. I also gained a deeper appreciation of the complexity of play, including its associated social, emotional, scientific, and cultural meanings. My informed perspective will serve me in my professional practice as I encounter and approach diverse beliefs of parenting groups in Saskatchewan with sensitivity and regard for cultural differences.

5.5 Strengths of the Current Study

The strengths of this study are three-fold: (1) the research topic is novel as it is the first of its kind to examine parental beliefs about play in the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan; (2) the findings highlight culturally-shaped parental beliefs as they pertain to play, thus engendering a rich, nuanced understanding of play according to parents; (3) the interview process generated stimulating and thought-provoking discussions which led participants to reflect on their own beliefs and practices, as well as those of other parents' which they might not have considered before.

A primary strength of this initial study is that it adds to the relative paucity of research dedicated to children's play in Canada. A rich understanding of play warrants its analysis in the local context—play is a multi-dimensional concept tied to a multitude of diverse meanings and interpretations (Cohen, 2006). This study adds to the research on play practices and beliefs of Western Canadian families, specifically Saskatchewan families. While the extant literature from North-American regions (Fisher et al., 2008; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011) served to guide the research, the findings of the current study help clarify the unique status of play in a Western Canadian province.

A second strength is the consideration of the role of culture in shaping parental beliefs of play. Culture is a key determinant of parenting beliefs (e.g., Goodnow, 1988), therefore the study of culturally-diverse families is greatly enhanced by the consideration of culture in the assessment of parental beliefs (Bornstein, 2012). A deficit-model (in which only Western ideas are considered normal) was avoided by investigating the parental play practices and beliefs in terms of the goals for children which vary according to the cultural circumstances of different communities (Rogoff, 2003). These findings, in turn, carry important implications for

educational stakeholders who seek to facilitate the progress of children from a range of cultural backgrounds in Canadian educational systems. Specifically, sensitivity and consideration to the cultural aspects of parenting will only be increasingly important in face of the steadily increasing immigration of minority groups in Western Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a) and the inevitable transition of the children of these families to local educational institutions.

A third strength of the study is that the focus group conversations garnered reflective discussions about the practices and beliefs of participants themselves as well as those of participants belonging to cultures other than their own. Some participants remarked recognition of similar beliefs within their focus group interview, while others demonstrated a greater awareness, understanding, and insight into their own viewpoints and those of others. In one case, reflection of divergent perspectives encountered in the focus group interview, together with personal observations of her own community's play practices, led a participant to consider previously unexplored ideas about the value of play and examine the basis of her own practices. While this was not the purpose of the study, these findings suggest the utility of targeting parental beliefs in an interview format to garner reflective and insightful discussions.

5.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings suggested three potential avenues for future research. The first direction concerns the need for a more extensive and focused research to account for the diversity of meanings about play among Canadian families. Of the 14 participants in the current study, the majority (ten) described themselves as Canadian (several of whom also described having a 'middle-class' background) and the majority (12) were mothers. The focus group phase of the larger research study, which this study is part of, is ongoing, and researchers will seek additional input from a wider sample of Saskatchewan parents/caregivers (e.g., more parents who are fathers, who are from urban and rural communities, who are from diverse cultural backgrounds, etc.). Replication studies could also serve to clarify the regularities in the ways cultural communities organize their children's activities as well as variations in the ways individual members participate in and perceive their children's activities.

Secondly, research has demonstrated the mediating role of parental, community, and child factors influencing children's play, such as parenting style, child temperament, ethnic socialization, social capital, neighborhood quality (e.g., Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015; LaForret & Mendez, 2017; Yildirim & Roopnarine, 2015). However, these variables were not a major

focus of the current study. A second direction would be to further identify and analyze particular patterns of similarities and differences across cultural groups residing in Western Canada with consideration for these other variables which work together with parental practices to influence child development (Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015).

The third and final potential direction for research is based on the salient finding that parents valued play as an important developmental activity, yet perceived its decline in children's lives. By these indications, an investigation of the role of play in child development is plenty warranted to more fully appreciate the benefits of play. This could involve the use of methods which were not included in the current study, such as parental forms for noting children's daily activities and observations of children's play with parents.

5.7 Conclusion

This study forms part of a larger SSHRC funded national research project and examined developmental perspectives of play within sociocultural contexts (Rogoff, 1990, 2003). The majority of previous research on parental perceptions of play has been conducted in the United States and has involved middle-class parents. Two published studies have focused on the perceptions of Eastern-Canadian parents (Lehrer & Petrakos, 2011; Gillis, 1991), and no published study has examined notions of play among the diverse groups of parents residing in the Western Canadian context. The initial view of the play perceptions amongst this sample of Saskatchewan parents/caregivers is necessary to help bridge social, cultural, and educational gaps related to play in Canadian classrooms. While parents expressed differing conceptualizations about the nature of play, they unanimously valued play in learning and development in this study. This includes one participant who demonstrated acceptance of the *learning through play* belief as she encountered the beliefs of fellow focus group members and reflected on her own play experiences. Another finding is that freedom to play within this urbanized sample of Western Canadian caregivers appears to be relative, dependent on individual constraints or those imposed by their respective cultures. Lastly, one of the major motives for either supporting or constraining certain types of play and other activities appears to be parents' underlying goals of learning and achievement of children—goals which were adopted to differing degrees and are culturally-appropriate given the central importance of schooling in children's lives in Saskatchewan. It is anticipated that this study will serve as an impetus to give

greater attention to how parents perceive play and that future research will continue to articulate a culturally-sensitive and relevant view of children's play in diverse contexts.

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Appendix E: Focus Group Discussion Guide/Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Let us begin by talking about who we are. Please introduce yourself by saying where you are from and what you do.
2. How is play defined within your culture?
3. Do you think your culture influences your view/understanding of play? How?
4. How do you define play?
5. Explain your understanding of play.
6. What are some activities that you would consider play?
7. Do you think play is important in your child's development? Why?
8. What do you think are some impacts of play on your child's development?
9. Describe some learning activities you use in your home with your child.
10. Do you play with your child? How often?
11. Is your child allowed play time at home? If so, how long?
12. What activities are they allowed to engage in? Why these activities?
13. How does your child react to activities in the home?
Is there anything else you would like to add?

