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Parent and Teachers' Perspectives on Young Children's Kindergarten Performance Following Play-Based Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT: Play-based learning is highly regarded within early childhood education scholarship and practice, yet American parents and kindergarten teachers report mixed views on play's relevance in preparing children for academic content in kindergarten. This qualitative, cross-case study explored parent and teacher perspectives on the role of play-based learning in building the kindergarten competency of four children entering kindergarten during the pandemic-affected 2020-2021 school year. Participants were recruited from a Reggio-Emilia-inspired play-based learning early childhood education center located in Northern Colorado and followed over the course of their child's kindergarten year. Data were collected through a series of semi-structured participant interviews, home visits during remote learning, and artifact collection from school. Yin's (2018) case-based approach to cross-case research informed the data analysis. Four themes emerged from this research: *"In-tune with others"*, *"I can count on her"*, *"Appreciates the challenge"*, and *"Just a good little student"*. Participants described the children as socially connected to peers and adults, reliable and independent workers, wanting to be challenged by their schoolwork, and capable of strong academic work across subjects. These findings illustrate how play-based learning equipped the children to navigate the complexities of their kindergartener role from the perspectives of their parents and kindergarten teachers. Early childhood scholars, professionals and parents can use these findings as a salient example of the underlying developmental mechanisms young children draw upon to build their learning dispositions and succeed in school.

Key words*: Kindergarten competency, kindergarten performance, kindergarten teacher perspectives, parent perspectives, play-based early childhood education.*

1. Introduction

Play-based learning has a long history as a prominent pedagogical approach in formalized early childhood education, with broad support within the international early childhood community (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2018; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Taylor & Boyer, 2019) and American education scholars (Zosh et al., 2018). Play-based learning gives young children a rich foundation of early development that strengthens their learning receptivity and responsiveness to classroom expectations (Clements & Wright, 2022; Zosh et al., 2022). The malleability of play and its undeniable appeal to young children makes it an effective mechanism for engaging young learners in a wide array of curricular priorities (Zosh et al., 2018). Yet the most prevalent critique of play-based pedagogical approaches in American early childhood education is that play-based learning does not prepare children for the academic rigor of kindergarten (Nilsson et al., 2018; Rademacher et al., 2021).

Guidelines for integrating academic content within early childhood curriculum directs educators to instruct young children in the foundational methods, tools of inquiry and essential structures of each academic discipline (i.e., reading, writing, science and math) using pedagogical practices where children are engaged,

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playful, inquisitive and have agency to solve problems autonomously (Clements & Wright, 2022). Focusing on non-academic skills prior to entering kindergarten aligns with kindergarten teachers' views of school readiness priorities (Hustedt et al., 2018). However, American educational reforms in the early 1990's introduced school readiness assessments measuring children's academic knowledge as they enter kindergarten; these policies created a sense of urgency among parents and early childhood educators for children to arrive at school well-versed in academic knowledge (Shoaga, 2015; Nicopouolou, 2010). As early childhood educators and parents grappled with societal pressure related to school readiness assessments, educational theorists and developmental scientists emphasized children's participation, discovery and exploration while learning, free from the constraints of rote instructional practices (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicoloupolou, 2010).

Studies have shown that children learn foundational academic concepts well in the context of play-based pedagogy, but the descriptions of children's learning are more formative in nature, e.g., children showing a deeper understanding of scientific inquiry (Miller & Saenz, 2021), stronger aptitude for math (Vogt et al., 2018), or more complete literacy expressions (Bollinger & Myers, 2019). Translating these formative observations into more quantifiable measures of academic proficiency aligned with school readiness measures could demonstrate how foundational academic aptitudes developed in the context of play-based early childhood education prepares children for kindergarten.

Parents and kindergarten teachers express complex and contradictory responses when asked about their views on the effectiveness of play-based pedagogy in early childhood education, though research exploring this topic is limited. Parents report favorable views of play-based pedagogy when they themselves have a high opinion of play (Woolnough, 2017) and liked that children are "hands-on learning" while playing (O'Gorman et al., 2012) but express concerns that children need more adult guidance and structure to master academic content (Ginsberg, 2007; Breathnach & Danby, 2016). Kindergarten teachers express inconsistencies in defining play-based learning (Feesha & Pyle, 2016), tend to dichotomize play from learning (Pui-wah & Stimpson, 2004) and feel pressure from colleagues and administrators to limit play-based pedagogy in favor of academic instruction (Lynch, 2015).

A limitation of parent and teacher perspective studies published to date is that parent and teacher participants were asked to describe their views on play-based learning based on their prior lived experiences rather than in the context of a specific child. Using a case study approach, Moon & Reifel (2008) found that a teacher debriefing on her specific experiences using play-based pedagogy in her pre-kindergarten classroom resulted in rich descriptions of how play-based pedagogy supported foundational academic gains in literacy. Woolnough (2017) explored 32 parents' views on play-based education by conducting focus groups with parents whose children were enrolled in play-based early childhood education centers. The authors found that parents appreciated play-based learning for their children and wanted to see these practices continue (Woolnough, 2017). These studies suggest that in-depth parent and teacher interviews allowing participants to situate their perspectives within a child's classroom context can be effective at undercovering participant views on play-based learning in educational settings.

This manuscript explores how parents and kindergarten teachers viewed children's kindergarten performance over the course of a school year following play-based early childhood education. For this manuscript, kindergarten performance encompasses how children enacted their role as kindergartners through academic advancement, relationship-building, and navigating classroom expectations.

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2. Materials and Methods

This manuscript is part of a larger, longitudinal research project exploring the relationship between play-based learning and kindergarten. Previous publications from the larger study include Fyffe et al. (2022) *Entering Kindergarten After Years of Play: A Cross-Case Analysis of School Readiness Following Play-Based Education* and Fyffe and Lewis (2024) *Does Play-Based Learning Support Children's Everyday Resiliency? A Cross-Case Analysis of Parents' and Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Play-Based Learning as a Precedent to Young Children's Coping During the Pandemic-Affected 2020–2021 School Year*.

Data were collected from September 2020 through May 2021. The Colorado State University Institutional Review Board approved this research (approval 19-9519H).

2.1. Study Design

Yin's (2018) cross-case approach informed the design of this qualitative study. Cross-case research analyzes the collective experiences of multiple participant cases through a process of comparative analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among case study participants. Cross-case study research promotes an in-depth understanding of complex phenomenon in context; in this case, understanding how play-based learning affected young children's kindergarten performance from the perspectives of their parents and kindergarten teachers (Yin, 2018).

Table 1. Descriptors and Characteristics of Participant Clusters (code names used).

Child Code Name	**Gender**	**Age at 1st interview**	**Birth order**	**Teacher's experience level**	**School Curriculum**	**Mother's Relationship Status**	**Mother's Employment and Education**
Cluster #1: Addy, Teacher, Mother	Female	5 years, 7 months	2nd of two siblings	28 years of teaching	Core Knowledge	Married	Working part-time; doctoral degree
Cluster #2: Isaac, Teacher, Mother	Male	6 years, 1 month	1st of two siblings	14 years of teaching	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math	Married	Working full-time; master's degree
Cluster #3: Leah, Teacher, Mother	Female	5 years, 6 months	2nd of two siblings	11 years of teaching	International Baccalaureate	Married	Working full-time; master's degree
Cluster #4: Nadine, Mother	Female	5 years, 6 months	2nd of two siblings	unknown	International Baccalaureate	Married	Working full-time; doctoral degree

2.2. Participants

We enrolled four participant clusters (parent and teacher reporting on the same child) as cases; see Table 1 for details. Four participant clusters are considered optimal when using cross-case methodology, as this number allows for variation in participant experiences but also the rich, immersive descriptions needed to fully explore participant perspectives and identify representative themes (Yin, 2018).

Using Yin's (2018) purposive sampling technique, we recruited parents based on their child's enrollment at a Reggio Emilia-inspired, play-based early childhood center (subsequently referred to as "the center") serving as a recruitment site. The Reggio Emilia-inspired philosophy of early childhood education emphasizes artistic expression, child-led exploration, engaging environments, and collaborative relationships to promote children's curiosity and joyfulness with learning (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Play-based pedagogy is grounded in guided play and the child maintains agency and freedom to explore while learning (Zosh et al., 2018).

The center is associated with a major university and located in a geographic region described in the United States Census (2022) as 85% White with USD 72,932 median household income, and with 56.6% of adults have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The center's executive director sent a series of emails to all parents whose children met the study's inclusion criteria of full-time enrollment at the center for a minimum of three years and entering kindergarten in the upcoming school year. Once parents enrolled in this study, they provided contact information for their child's kindergarten teacher so we could extend an invitation to join the

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study. Mothers were the parent informants in all four participant clusters and three of the four invited kindergarten teachers participated in this research. One teacher declined participation due to concerns with additional responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic-affected school year.

2.3. Procedures

Semi-structured participant interviews were our primary data source; each participant completed a series of three interviews at the start, midpoint, and conclusion of the school year. We supplemented the interview data with artifact collection and home visits during remote learning. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim.

Table 2. Sampling of Interview Protocol Questions by Participant Group.

Interview Foci	**Sample Questions**
Understand and describe the child's kindergarten performance.	*What do you think is going well for {Child} in kindergarten? What struggles as {Child} shared? ** *Can you share a sample of {Child}'s schoolwork, and walk me through how this illustrates {Child} as a learner? *** *Walk me through the changes and growth you have seen in {Child} this past year. How would you summarize his/her experiences and accomplishments? ****

Note: *asked of all participants.
**asked of teachers only.
***asked of parents only.

We used distinct but complementary interview protocols for the parent and teacher groups; see Table 2 for interview question examples. Questions were designed to compare and contextualize participant perspectives through a combination of shared inquiries and probing cues that optimized each participant group's unique perspective on the child. For example, when Addy's teacher emphasized Addy's leadership tendencies and social awareness in the classroom, we asked Addy's mother to describe her early socialization and friendships. From this inquiry, we learned that Addy was a highly social infant who grew into the leader of her neighborhood friend group due to her competency with peer negotiations and conflict resolution. Addy's mother believed that play-based learning had supported Addy's autonomy and language skills, and this contributed to her prowess with including children of all ages in neighborhood play. Addy's mothers' early development insight augmented Addy's teachers' observations of Addy as being highly aware of children who were alone on the playground or in conflict with one another.

In the case of Nadine, who had only a parent participant, we used the parent interview protocol during interviews and asked her to provide work samples and school-generated reports. We then incorporated Nadine's data within the cross-case analysis as appropriate, acknowledging the absence of data originating from her teacher.

2.4. Data Analysis

Congruent with Yin's (2018) cross-case methodology, we completed within case analysis prior to cross case analysis. By identifying common patterns across the four cases, we were able to construct collective themes representing the children's kindergarten performance as described by the parent and teacher participants. Table 4 illustrates this process.

Within-Case Analysis. At the conclusion of each interview, author LF familiarized herself with the transcript, documented her reactions and biases, and listed the topics parents and teachers emphasized by case. In the second phase, the data was grouped by topic, resulting in data sets organized along conceptual clusters. In the third phase, author LF worked through the data groupings and developed initial codes with extrapolated, verbatim text. In the fourth phase, author LF defined, described, and illustrated the individual case themes with representative quotes.

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Cross-Case Analysis. First, author LF reduced the data set to focus on the most significant themes from the individual case analysis; these became axial codes linking the data across cases. For this manuscript, kindergarten performance, defined broadly as how children performed as classmates and learners at home and school, was the axial code of interest. In the second phase, author LF operationalized kindergarten performance into a probing question which guided the cross-case analysis. Finally, author LF constructed cross-case themes using inductive coding to extrapolate the major descriptors of kindergarten performance common to all cases.

2.5. Pandemic Influence

Consistent with public health orders, the children attended kindergarten remotely until full-time in-person instruction began on January 18, 2021. The children were intentionally supported by their parents during remote instruction. One family hosted a learning pod led by a licensed teacher, one family enrolled their child in a learning pod with a licensed teacher, and two families created dedicated school spaces within their home which they supervised. Teachers described how the multiple instructional format shifts and extended time at home impacted the school year, specifically noting broad disengagement during remote learning, low confidence in children once in-person instruction resumed, and global learning loss. Teachers believed the children who were the focus of this study were exceptions to these adverse effects, and this disparity may have influenced their perspectives.

2.6. Research Rigor

Participants were interviewed three times over the course of the 2020-2021 school year; this prolonged engagement allowed us to clarify statements, explore concepts, and confirm interpretations. We used data triangulation to link our findings to explicit data excerpts to ensure trustworthiness. We practiced highly disciplined subjectivity by writing research memos tracking major decisions and reflexive memos to explore our assumptions and biases. We met regularly to discuss the data and arrive at a consensus with the findings.

2.7. Positionality

Author LF is a licensed occupational therapist with twenty years of pediatric experience at the onset of this study. LF served as the primary occupational therapist and occupational therapy internship supervisor at the center for five years prior to recruitment. Author LF therefore knew the children described in this manuscript prior to study.

3. Findings

We identified four themes describing the children's kindergarten performance: *in-tune with others, I can count on her, appreciates the challenge,* and *just a good little student*. See Table 3 for theme definitions, descriptions, and illustrations.

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Table 3. Kindergarten Performance Theme Definitions, Descriptions, and Illustrations.

Theme	Definition	Description	Illustrative Quotes
In-tune with others	Socially connected, seeks opportunities for altruism, or inclusive of others.	Stories or observations where the child initiates an action to better others or build relations and connections with others.	When Isaac talks, he shares a lot of experiences and right away picked up on names of all the kids and wanted to talk with them. (Isaac, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 4)
I can count on her	Morality, self-management, trustworthiness. Ability to work independently and handle stress or change.	Stories or observations of the child acting with integrity, handling disruption, being reliable, or working independently.	I think probably because she is one to follow directions. I could probably give Addy five step direction and she could follow through on it with flying colors. (Addy, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 12)
Appreciates the challenge	Desire for challenge and advancing their own learning; investment in learning or desire to be productive.	Quotes or observations demonstrating the child's drive to learn more and be challenged.	I think she's really loving the academic side and she's really excited to learn about letters and numbers. The other day, she told me, "I just can't stop thinking about math." (Nadine, 2nd Parent Interview, p. 8)
Just a good little student	Learning receptivity, application of knowledge, responsive to instruction, or overall well-rounded student.	Stories or observations of the child meeting academic expectations and responding to instruction.	I think her major strength is that she can easily take those skills and apply them in a variety of situations, and a variety of learning experiences. (Leah, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 17)

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Table 4. Theme Construction Using Within-Case to Cross-Case Analysis.

Data Analysis Process	**Sample Excerpts Illustrating the Cross-Case Theme "*I can count on her*"**
Phase 1: Identify Axial Codes "Kindergarten performance" identified as an axial code within the larger data set.	*I can send her to her table to do a task and not have to worry about her. I know that she can go to her table, and get the job done with minimal distractions. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 12).*
Phase 2: Develop a Probing Question "How did participants describe the children's performance as kindergarteners?"	She is very conscientious about having her water bottle every day, having her snack, having her extra mask…she's very conscientious and responsible. *(Nadine, 2nd Parent Interview, p. 2).*
Phase 3: Data Groupings Data related to kindergarten performance identified across the four cases.	*I noticed when she's working and it's quiet, you'll just see her progress with writing or with math, with her ability to focus. (Leah, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 18)*
Phase 4: Cross-Case Themes Cross-case themes describing the children's kindergarten performance are developed.	I think he's inclined to be a bit of an achiever in life, and I think he likes proving that he can do it. And each worksheet is just another way for him to affirm that he's got it. (Isaac, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 3).

3.1. Theme 1: "In-Tune with Others"

Social and emotional development was a recurring theme in interviews with parent and teacher participants. The children excelled as classmates and were described by their teachers as well versed in building social connections and recognizing the needs of others. Leah's teacher commented about Leah's social acclimation to kindergarten by saying, "Just being in tune to the things around her, she's kind of a head above the rest."

Teachers also described the children as inclusive of others, and attentive to social details like learning names and recognizing faces. Addy's teacher commented on how Addy fits within the social structure of the classroom by saying "I feel she's pretty good about including anybody. I've never seen her or heard her exclude anyone*."* She went on to describe Addy's social connections with her classmates.

> *I feel like Addy does really well where I've seen some of the other ones, not so much. She's just a happy kiddo and she includes everyone. Just the fact that she's in tune with others, she knows who people are, she knows how to help them, and she recognizes their faces. (Addy, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 15)*

Isaac's teacher noticed that Isaac was well received by his classmates because he made efforts at connecting with others, especially his neurodiverse peers. She observed that Isaac's memory for details and acknowledgement of others fostered his social success.

> *So other kids feel really welcomed and liked by Isaac. I think he's just really good at remembering kids' names and making connections and empowering kids. We have three students with autism in our classroom and there's one child in particular who I think he really likes to play with. When they're playing, he wants to share his ideas, and he advocates for the other kids. "This is their idea. Isn't that cool?" (Isaac, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 28)*

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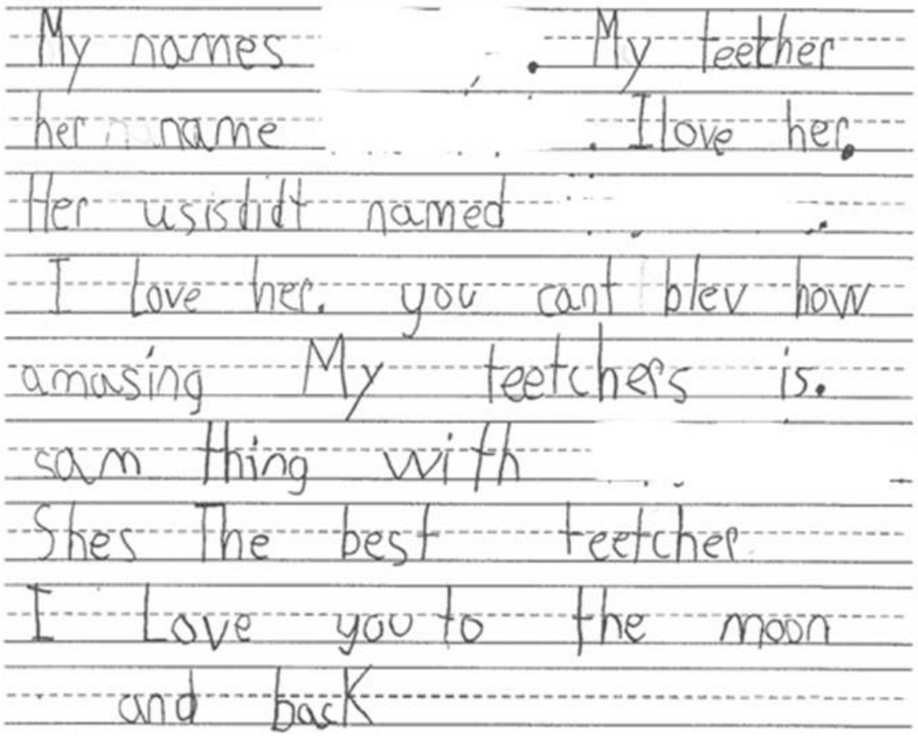


Figure 1. Leah writes a letter to her teacher and teaching assistant expressing her gratitude.

Teachers also noticed the thoughtfulness the children brought to their daily interactions with peers and adults in the classroom. "I feel like without me prompting her or anything, she's very helpful towards her classmates." Addy's teacher said. Leah's teacher described how Leah enacted thoughtfulness during a creative writing assignment by composing a thank you letter to both her teacher and paraprofessional (See Figure 1).

> *This day, without any prompting from anybody else, she decided to write a letter to her teacher. And the thoughtful girl she is decides that she wants to communicate words of appreciation to her teacher. (Leah, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 15)*

3.2. Theme 2: "I Can Count on Her"

Participants also described the cognitive maturity the children demonstrated with managing their learning in the classroom. The children presented as advanced in their self-management skills in that they worked through distractions and disruptions. These examples also illustrate the interconnectedness of language, social and cognitive development, as the children could either ascertain how to proceed in class by watching their peers, ask a question of their teacher, or sit with uncertainty before arriving at a plan to complete their work. Addy's teacher reflected on Addy's assignment to the "independent" worktable based on her confidence with Addy's focus on classwork.

> *I can send her to her table to do a task and not have to worry about her. Addy is usually in the independent category because I know that she can go to her table, and get the job done with minimal distractions. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 12)*

Participants also noted that the children could handle working with little adult supervision because they could solve problems or ask for help from a teacher or peer. Leah's teacher described her decision-making process in assigning Leah a seat in the back of the classroom.

> *There's not a lot of good kids to put in the back, and you can't count on some children to be doing the right thing all the time. So those were the kids that really needed to be put in the front, and then Leah got put further in the back because I knew I could count on her. (Leah, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 8)*

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Emotional sturdiness was another trait that supported these children's ability to work independently. The children were able to navigate conflict and use teacher feedback constructively to improve upon their schoolwork. Addy's teacher described how Addy reacted to change and feedback.

> *Addy is a kiddo who goes with the flow and if something happens and we have to change our schedule, it is not going to disrupt her. She also takes criticism well, I mean, she doesn't deflate or get angry or anything if you point out something that she forgot or whatever, which is also good. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 18)*

Another factor contributing to the competency of the children was their ability to articulate their needs. Examples of this include navigating social dilemmas and advocating for learning support. Isaac's teacher described a scenario where Isaac was hesitant when invited to a play date.

> *So, another friend has invited him to have a play date at his grandma and grandpa's, and Isaac says, "We're not quite ready for that yet. We need to have a couple of play dates at my house first". And he will use words to explain what's happening exactly in this relationship. (Isaac, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 5)*

Leah's teacher described how Leah navigated her learning needs by describing the "loudness" of the classroom and requesting an adjustment to her seat assignment so she could focus more easily.

> *I would say that there are a handful of kids who, by the end of the year, are able to notice and articulate their feelings. It's a higher-level skill, and I wouldn't say a lot of them get to that point. Like her description of loud is perfect, where she couldn't tell you exactly what that means, but it just felt loud. (Leah, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 16)*

Finally, the children's competency across the many different school environments enabled them to work independently. The children felt comfortable navigating their schools, embraced their newfound responsibilities, and leveraged their academic skills to stay focused and productive when given a task to complete. "She's doing great", said Nadine' mom as she described their morning routine before school. "She is very conscientious about having her water bottle every day, having her snack, and having her extra mask. She's very conscientious and responsible".

The children's thinking skills also contributed to their reliability in the classroom. Addy's teacher illustrated her reliability by sharing a story of how Addy completed a writing assignment about Abraham Lincoln.

> *Addy's really good about just being able to come up with her own ideas. If I say, "Today you're going to write about what we learned about Abraham Lincoln." She could go to her table and write all the way down to the bottom of the page things that she learned about Abraham Lincoln with minimal questions. Most kids will need some ideas or help sounding out words, whereas Addy can go and she'll not only remember what we talked about, but she'll be able to put it down on the paper. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 13)*

3.3. Theme 3: "Appreciates the Challenge"

The children approached learning with a desire to be intellectually challenged and to perform at the apex of their academic abilities. Addy's mother described a conversation with Addy where she reflected on the kindergarten year. "I asked her what her favorite part of kindergarten was, and she said, "Getting smarter." She went on to describe how Addy wanted to be challenged by reading, saying "She doesn't want to read the little flip books. She wants to read books with bigger words that have multiple sentences".

Leah's teacher described a conversation she had with Leah about what she had learned in kindergarten. Leah responded with "Sometimes it's really hard to write, but it gets your brain thinking". She reflected further by describing how Leah responds to challenges.

> *So, it goes back to the piece where she appreciates that challenge. She's not one of those kids who just completely shuts down because of the challenge. She knows it feels hard, and she knows that hard piece is a good thing because it's, in her words, it's getting your brain thinking. (Leah, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 17)*

While the children found satisfaction in their academic accomplishments, they also wanted to produce something with their newfound knowledge. Parents and teachers shared many stories of the children using

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their knowledge to serve a creative purpose. Nadine's mother described the books Nadine made about owls after a lesson at school.

> *She had made one that she loves about owls from when she learned about owls and owl babies and where they nest and what they eat and what they do. And so, she wrote the words and drew the pictures and she loved that. And she was really proud of herself. And she said, "I didn't know how to write books before." (Nadine, 3rd Parent Interview, p.9)*

Isaac's teacher also described how Isaac used his academic skills to represent what he knew or to share his knowledge with others. She described how he sought to use his knowledge to produce something of intrinsic value.

> *I think that his academic strengths have always been there, his comfort with letters and sounds, and his number strengths have been there. But I think what has made the most growth this year is his ability to access them and do something with them, produce something with what he knows. (Isaac, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 29)*

Participants also described the children as excited for learning and wanting to go beyond the scope of classroom expectations when producing work. "I just can't stop thinking about math." Nadine told her mother on a walk home from school. Leah's teacher described Leah's eagerness to excel in the classroom.

> *Academically, she's just doing great in all areas. She's focused, and she wants to do her best. So that increases her success in all areas. Her willingness and desire to learn definitely promotes that growth. (Leah, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 2)*

Isaac's teacher shared how Isaac was excited to learn and sought permission to extend his work in the classroom. She shared that Isaac often asked to do more work than was expected of the class.

> *He loves to learn. If I give him some words that I want him to build a sentence with, he asks if he can build his own after he builds the sentences that I asked him to. So I say, "If you want to go above and beyond, then you can build your own sentences after this." (Isaac, 2nd Teacher Interview, p. 19)*

3.4. Theme 4: "Just a Good Little Student"

Teachers described the children as well-rounded students who made steady progress over the academic year. Leah's teacher noted "Leah fits in very well with my classroom expectations for kindergarteners. She would be on the higher end of things". She reflected on Leah's progress and described the factors that have allowed her to be successful in kindergarten.

> *She's eager to do well. Her ability to write and revise complex ideas would be an example of her being a step ahead. You'll see the growth in things like this in all kinds of students, but I wouldn't quite say to this level. I feel like she started off where most people did at the beginning of the year but seeing her transfer skills into independent writing is quite outstanding for her. (Leah, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 18)*

Teachers also found the children to be very responsive to instruction, noting that the children were able to take concepts or strategies and apply them to novel situations. Isaac's teacher described Isaac by saying "He will apply what I've asked him to change or a direction I'd like him to go". Addy's teacher noted how Addy retains instructions to make progress with her academics.

> *I feel like she listens to everything that we're teaching and she's now applying those things. I feel like she listens to the lessons that are being taught every day and she really internalizes them and when she goes to practice whatever has just been taught, she really is truly practicing it. She's remembered what I've said and now she's implementing it. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 15)*

Teachers described how writing is often the biggest academic challenge of kindergarten because children have a hard time thinking of what to write. However, the children were proficient with both writing to a prompt (i.e.: What did you learn about Abraham Lincoln?) and creative writing (i.e.: If you could build a house, what would go in it?) in part because of their thinking skills. Addy's teacher commented on how Addy compared to her peers in this area.

> *I'm really proud of her especially in writing because a lot of kids in kindergarten have a really hard time coming up with what they want to write. Even if I give them a topic, it's still hard for them to come up with what they want to write about that topic without me giving some kind of prompt. Whereas Addy can go and she'll not only remember what we talked about, but she'll be able to put it down on the paper. (Addy, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 13)*

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All the children made steady gains over their kindergarten year, with teachers and parents expressing confidence that the children were ready for first grade. Addy's teacher commented on Addy's progress over the school year saying "She's just a really good little student. She likes to learn; she responds really well to positivity." Nadine's mother reflected on Nadine's growth over the school year.

> *Yeah, it's just been a time of tremendous growth. And I remember her teacher saying that the kiddos enter kindergarten it's like such little babies, which changes so quickly. And now, these mature kids and they've seen so much growth in her. And as part of school, she was reflecting on the year and how much she's grown, and she was talking about how she learned to count to 100. She learned about the letters. (Nadine, 3rd Parent Interview, p.3)*

Isaac's teacher described Isaac by saying "He has a really good foundation for learning, he's really smart and really eager." She went on to describe his accomplishments in kindergarten.

> *He has met math goals, writing goals, reading goals, and he can express his ideas and form sentences. I feel like he's leaving kindergarten at a really good time, in a really good place. Really ready to just conquer the world now, truly, and all of his interests and background knowledge and all that he knows he's going to be able to apply more and more easily as he gets older. (Isaac, 3rd Teacher Interview, p. 9)*

4. Discussion

This qualitative cross-case study describes how parents and teachers viewed the kindergartner performance of four children following play-based early childhood education. Participants believed that play-based learning immersed the children in novelty, collaboration, and learning through trial and error; thus, fostering flexible thinking, social reciprocity, and enjoyment of challenge and ambiguity. Participants described how the children demonstrated their learning readiness, assimilated to classroom expectations, and enjoyed the process of growing as students through advancements in reading, writing, math, and other academic content areas.

The stories of how the children developed as writers seem especially salient in exploring how play prepares young children for academics. Congruent with play-based pedagogy, these children were given daily opportunities to express their ideas through artwork, building, storytelling, and sketching. They were also immersed in a language-rich environment focused on emotional fluency and encouraged to work collaboratively with teachers and peers to both resolve conflict and explore their interests. Bollinger and Myers (2019) stated that children draw upon their emotional fluency, command of narrative language, and ability to conceptualize and represent their ideas to become proficient writers. The stories of how these children performed as writers illustrated the relationship between learning readiness and academic performance, in that these children were readied for writing through engagement in storytelling and self-expression which gave them the confidence and underlying language, memory, and attention skills needed to contend with written expression in kindergarten. The children arrived at kindergarten well prepared to conceptualize their ideas and express them for a variety of audiences; this seemingly contributed to their writing prowess at school.

Slot et al. (2017) described how self-regulation contributes to emotional and metacognitive functioning in the classroom, stating that these skills are best learned through play-based experiences. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) stated that "brain development and the learning it enables are directly dependent on social-emotional experience" (p. 185). For young children, their ability to think and learn in the classroom is dependent upon their ability to manage their emotions in response to stress and challenge. Teachers described these children as reliable, trustworthy, and able to work on their own seemingly because they were motivated to advance their learning, monitor their own productivity, and adjust their strategies to produce quality work. The children's ability to work independently provides a salient example of how children draw upon self-regulation strategies to make advancements in their academic learning in the classroom.

Participants attributed many factors from the children's prior experiences with play-based learning to their success in kindergarten, most notably with their language, social, and cognitive development. The children's orientation towards growth and comfort with challenge allowed them to lean into their kindergarten responsibilities and persist when learning was difficult. The children's social skills allowed them to establish relationships with their teachers, administrators, and peers; these relationships provided a source of encouragement and allowed them to expand their perspectives through productive collaborations. Warm,

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social relationships with teachers augmented the children's thinking skills by creating a safe learning context; a sense of security and comfort seemed to promote how well the children understood and applied concepts in novel and varied ways. While the children entered kindergarten with a range of academic knowledge, their abundance of thinking, relating, and introspection provided smooth passage to sustained learning, personal growth, and academic progress throughout their kindergarten year. As described by Miller and Saenz (2021), when children's own internal processes for inquiry and discovery are supported, they make stronger advances in academic knowledge.

5. Conclusions

This study describes the perspectives of parents and teachers as to the processes that readied the children for academic instruction and assimilation to the kindergartener role. Foundational to this process was immersion in play-based early childhood education that propagated the children's positive approaches to learning, self-management, and social relationships. Early childhood educators, allied scholars, and child-focused practitioners can use these findings to illustrate how learning dispositions arise from play-based contexts supporting robust early child development.

5.1. Limitations

Congruent with cross-case study and qualitative research paradigms, the descriptions of these children's kindergarten performance were derived from the collective perspectives of their mothers and kindergarten teachers and were not compared with other measures of kindergarten performance such as State-mandated standardized assessments. There were also many factors related to the children's kindergarten experience that were not explicitly explored, such as the role of supportive parents and engaged teachers, that likely impacted the children's performance.

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