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## Voices from Within: Teacher Sensitivity in an Early Childhood Elementary School

Anjenette Victoria Holmes

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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Anjenette Victoria Holmes

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# **VOICES FROM WITHIN: TEACHER SENSITIVITY IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

School of Education

by

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Anjenette Victoria Holmes

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using a qualitative case study approach, grounded in an ecological systems theory framework, this project sought to understand how a teacher describes her journey of becoming sensitive and uncover what helps or hinders a teacher's ability to sensitive. This study collected and examined data from multiple data sources, which included direct and participant observations, collected documents and artifacts, semi-formal and informal interviews with school members, along with a focus-group. Data was evaluated for common codes and relevant emerging themes are discussed. Six early childhood teachers at an early childhood elementary school participated in the study. Results suggest that there are certain environmental and human factors that intersect, which impact teacher sensitivity. Teachers described strategies that can be implemented both in the classroom and within the school itself to make the environment more suited to engage in sensitive caregiving. Implications for administrators who work in early childhood settings and who manage early childhood teachers are presented.

## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Voices from Within: Teacher Sensitivity in an Early Childhood Elementary School**

The teacher is an integral part of the design of the early childhood classroom, playing a significant role in children's academic and emotional development. A teacher's ability to be sensitive or aware of children's academic and emotional needs is critical to children's development and learning (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). A teacher's ability to monitor students, to detect cues signaling when they need extra support, and to possess skills for consistently responding to children's academic and emotional cues in real time encompasses the field term, teacher sensitivity (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2002). While the early childhood and teacher education literature contains information about teacher sensitivity and its impact on children, it does not include teachers' voices and perspectives. The present project seeks to explore teachers' understanding of teacher sensitivity- their journey and development of teacher sensitivity and the beliefs about what helps them and hinders their ability to be sensitive in the classroom.

A qualified, dedicated, and experienced teacher is essential; however, a sensitive teacher is a necessary component of a high-quality early childhood learning environment. We know little about how early childhood teachers think and feel about teacher sensitivity (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). This present study uses case study methodology to explore teacher sensitivity from the perspective of the teacher, allowing them to express in their own voice what affects their ability to be sensitive in the early childhood context. This work is important because theories of best practice and current research support the need for early childhood teachers to be sensitive when interacting with young children (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004) and sensitive involved caregiving is related to positive child outcomes for both children and classrooms

(Howes & Smith, 1995). The literature surrounding early childhood outcomes and environments lacks the experiences of teachers, which is the basis for this project.

Over the last few decades, research has focused on optimal learning environments for preschool children (Vitiello, 2014). This work has successfully identified environmental impacts on children's learning (NICHD, 2002) and structural indicators that programs should meet (Blau & Currie, 2006; Munton, et al. 1995; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, 2010). Researchers have also succeeded in identifying the physical aspects of the learning environment that keep children safe and support creativity (Sabol & Pianta, 2014). There has been a recent shift to focus on the quality of teacher-child interactions (Dennis & O'Conner, 2013) and their impact on children's later academic success and emotional competence (NICHD, 2002). The early childhood teacher is an essential component of the prescribed ideal setting for children. The field needs to hear their voices. Emotions are an integral part of a teacher's job and have an impact on their effectiveness, behavior, motivation, and cognition (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). It is essential to capture teachers' perspectives because there has been increased focus on the emotional climate of the preschool classroom as it relates to emotional adjustment and early learning (Goldstein, Arnold, Rossenberg, Stowe, & Ortiz, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman, LaParo, Downer, and Pianta, 2005).

Early childhood environments include physical space and emotional space. Understanding how school-level factors are interconnected and interdependent (Pianta & Walsh, 1996) is essential to improve and sustain high quality learning environments. Organizational climate of the school stresses the interactive nature between people and their environments (Bloom, 2010) and this includes their collective perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, values, and the quality of their relationships (Bloom, Hentschel, & Bella, 2010). Children and teachers share

emotional relationships that are a component of classroom quality (Bloom, 1989; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Iutovich, Fiene, Johnson, Koppel, & Langan, 1997; Lower & Cassidy, 1997). Exploring how teachers think about sensitivity and understanding their perceptions of organizational climate will positively affect learning outcomes for children and overall classroom quality (Brookover, Schweitzer, Schneider, Beady et al. 1978; Bloom, 2010; Hoy, et al. 1991). Hoy and Tarter, 1992 have identified general factors of school climate: the institution, the administration, and the teachers. Teachers' emotional health, formal training, and perceptions of their work environment are considered important factors of organizational climate (Gerber, et al. 2007). Few studies have examined whether school characteristics are related to classroom quality (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013). The area of the school where the most critical social-emotional relationships take place is the classroom, which is where physical space and emotional space intersect, with the teacher being the most important element of that space. Teachers' emotional health, formal training, and perceptions of their work environment may contribute to how they perceive the health of their organization and how they function in the classroom. A high-quality space includes a teacher as an important part of the design (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013). It is of interest to explore teachers' perceptions of organizational climate within the school and to discover what it means to be a sensitive teacher from the perspective of the teacher. Limited knowledge is available regarding organizational factors that influence the ability of early childhood teachers to have positive and effective interactions with young children (Gerber, et al. 2007; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). Organizational climate is connected to teachers to the degree to which they think they have control over curriculum content and method of instruction and how much administrative

support they receive, (Christina & Nicholson–Goodman, 2005) and the perception may impact a teacher’s ability to be sensitive and nurturing (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015).

Understanding the way the teacher views organizational climate will assist researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in creating and sustaining high learning environments. Few studies have investigated the relationship between organizational climate and early childhood school settings from the unique perspective of the early childhood teacher. Hamre & Pianta (2006) suggests, “Talking with a teacher and conducting observations in the classroom will provide important and unique information for designing interventions” (p. 55).

The ability for teachers to be sensitive, responsive, and predictable in their interactions with children helps children to develop secure attachments with adults (Belsky & Fearon, 2008; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). This study will contribute to the field of education by providing administrators and teachers with an awareness of the qualities and traits of a sensitive teacher and which specific components of organizational climate influence a teacher’s ability to be sensitive or not. This will be helpful to the field of education by providing administrators guidance as they select and hire effective and qualified teachers.

A sensitive teacher is an important part of designing a well-functioning classroom where children thrive academically and emotionally. Unfortunately, many of those that are in a place of power and create policy are not in a position to interpret the subtleties of various types of education and training (Early, Alva, Bender, Bryant, et al. 2007, p.561). Designing the emotional space of a classroom is critical to overall classroom construction. My goal is to conduct a case study of how a preschool teacher comes to know their role as a sensitive teacher. “Little research has examined the factors that influence the ability of ECE teachers to have positive and effective interactions with young children” (Gerber et al. 2007, p.327). The outcomes of the quality and

intensity of a preschool teacher's relationships with a child are concepts that largely go unexplored in the research literature as well (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2005; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). An association between children's social-emotional competence and academic performance in organizational research has been established (Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012; Hyson, 2004; Raver, Blair, & Li-Grining, 2012).

Current quality initiatives focus on content and methods of instruction for teachers. An established and existing classroom experience assumes to include sensitive and caring interactions with children. Preschool teachers receive communication regarding changes informally through peers, meetings, and in-service trainings. A top-down approach usually determines curriculum. This approach ultimately affects classroom experiences. All of these reforms are impactful but neglect the critical component of the teacher in the classroom. The teacher's qualities and the relationship that he/she is able to develop with children is perhaps what influences children's ability to succeed more than any other is.

Policymakers and program administrators may assume and expect that preschool teachers wholeheartedly embrace changes to instruction and program management. However, the push for reform may influence teachers' emotional support of children (Bloom & Abel, 2015; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, & Howes, 2008; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008; Zinsser, Curby, 2014). Some disparity may exist between what scholars in the field would like teachers to do and what teachers actually do when confronted with educational reforms (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). The sensitivity of the teacher to children's needs and interests can be a large factor in the effectiveness of educational reform efforts. Unfortunately, there has been little research on how teachers come to know their own sensitivity.

What we do know is that teachers are better able to assist children with social–emotional growth when they act sensitively (Pianta, 1999) and can assist children who are already at risk for experiences that will negatively shape their emotional and academic outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham & Burton, 1996; Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2005) acknowledges the importance of emotional space inside the classroom. NAEYC suggests that learning occurs in classrooms in the context of lessons, classroom routines, and play interactions. Teachers skillfully combine direct instruction with opportunistic exposures to reasoning, memory and problem-solving activities. Initiatives are rarely explored that focus on teacher sensitivity, in length or depth in the design of curriculum and physical space of the classroom. Rules that govern early childhood education do not focus on the specific detailed information about what skills teachers need (Early, et al. 2007).

Administrators, supervisors, and even parents, usually assume that preschool teachers are teaching preschoolers because they have a predisposition to being sensitive and nurturing to children by default. This is not always the case. Not all teachers hold personal beliefs about teaching behaviors that match what scholars in the field of early childhood education view as important (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). Research has shown that teachers who can cut through distractions and truly connect with children have significant and lasting effects on their outcomes (Vitiello, 2014, p.3).

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is important to investigate the experiences of early childhood educators from their perspectives. Teachers' beliefs and behaviors may serve as contextual filters through which they interpret their classroom experiences (Clark & Peterson, 1984). Although the relationship

between the preschool teacher and the child is essential to developing quality programs for children, both the way a teacher views organizational factors is unknown and how his/her views impact teacher sensitivity are unknown (Gerber, et al. 2007). A teacher's work environment may influence a teacher's ability to interact with children in a sensitive manner; however, few studies have focused on what factors within teachers, classroom, and center settings contribute to teacher sensitivity (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Mill & Romano-White, 1999; Pianta, et al. 2005). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the voices of the teachers and their perceptions and thoughts about teacher sensitivity.

Early childhood learning environments are varied and diverse. Early childhood education occurs in various auspices, with teachers that have different levels and types of training. Family childcare, early learning childcare centers, Head Start centers, and publicly funded pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs all fall under the umbrella of early childhood education. There are many differences among these contexts that influence administrators, teachers, families and children. For example, public schools have different funding sources, depending on the location of the school, the goals of each may or may not identify with the particular missions of the next. They may each have unique leadership styles and roles or they may offer a unique interpretation of child learning and development. Teacher support may also be different. For the pre-kindergarten teacher, there is a choice of where to teach, which largely depends on the individual's educational and training background, teaching philosophy, and personal life choices. Public school pre-kindergarten programs are designed differently, each possessing unique qualities that encompass organizational climate (Connors & Morris, 2015).

The educational system as a whole, which consists of government administration, policies, and funding, to the classroom instruction style of the preschool teacher, affect the



quality of a child's early childhood educational experience (Connors & Morris, 2015). Although appropriate guidance and funding are crucial, it is not enough to administer policy and fund early childhood education through federal and state mandates. Collaboration and research between the policymakers and those who work directly with children in the early childhood classroom are essential. A continued investigation into the ways in which the organizational climate of early childhood learning environments affect teacher sensitivity is fundamental to ensure that preschool children have the best experience in the classroom during this cognitive, social, and emotionally sensitive period in their development.

My experience of over twenty years of working in various roles in the field of early childhood education has shaped my role in this case study. Throughout the years, I have been an administrator of a childcare center, an educational specialist, an assistant manager, an observer, an assessor, an instructor, a trainer, and even the bus driver at times. In spite of all of these roles and positions, I most identify with the position of preschool teacher. I believe that my experiences have given me unique insight into the system that is early childhood education and what it takes to thrive as a professional in the many different roles early childhood education encompasses. I also understand that my experiences have shaped my biases about many ideas, including the definition of a sensitive teacher.

I first became aware of sensitive teaching when I served as a "floater" in an infant classroom. A floater provides staff reprieve by moving around the center and coming into the classroom to give lead teachers 15-minute breaks from their caregiving. When the teacher returned after her break, an infant began to cry, and I immediately went over to comfort the infant. That is when the teacher explained to me that I was "spoiling her babies." Every day as the babies and I spent this time together, they became more and more accustomed to my

responsiveness. When I would leave the room, the babies became impatient, putting more stress on the teacher's ability to manage the group. This experience had a profound impact on me. What caused us to have such different responses to children? What was different about our journeys and preparations that lead us to these decisions? What supports and training could help us to make a more consistent experience for children? These questions have perplexed me throughout my career.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present project is to understand how teachers experience and develop sensitivity and what helps them to be sensitive. Traditionally, the early childhood environment has often been examined from the lens of the physical space of the classroom and the instructional support offered by teachers using checklists and rating scales. Early childhood education could benefit from alternative types of measures, inquiry, and study that can inform practice and policy. The individual teacher is a part of the emotional space of the learning environment and a case study approach will allow a rich and robust account of how a teacher describes her journey and understanding of teacher sensitivity and the helps and hindrances for this construct. Ultimately, this information can contribute to the design of quality programs and the recruitment and retention of the most capable teachers. Researchers have found that teachers who engage in sensitive interactions promote both social and emotional development and academic skills, such as language and reading competence (Burchinal, et al. 2002; Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997, Pianta, 1999; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Factors beyond the physical environment, which include teacher sensitivity, contribute to overall outcomes for children. Early childhood research over the last few decades has focused on identifying relationships between quality and child outcomes

(Duncan, 2003; NICHD ECCRN) and there is a great deal of evidence (Phillips, et. al 2012; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010) that supports this fact in the cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional developmental domains (Finch et al. 2015, p. 126). The purpose of this case study is to highlight teacher sensitivity through the experiences of teachers and highlighting their journey to becoming sensitive. The primary phenomenon that is driving this project is the desire to understand how a teacher describes her journey to becoming a sensitive teacher and explore what teachers say helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive.

### **Setting**

This project uses a single case study approach to explore how teachers describe their journey to becoming sensitive and what helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive within the context of a pre-kindergarten elementary school. Ecological framework grounded and guided the present project. Documents, direct and participant observations, physical artifacts, interviews, and focus groups from a variety of sources including teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and volunteers were sought; as well as individual teacher perspectives. This approach will attempt to provide an ecological view into the development of early childhood teacher sensitivity and describe their voices, their thought processes, and their perceptions of sensitivity within the organization.

### **Significance of the Study**

Children benefit in all domains of development from meaningful interactions with adults who are consistent in their lives and who respond to them with sensitivity. Many factors affect these relationships. Teacher-child relationships are influenced by the characteristics of the teacher as well as the environment (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Howes, et al. 2008; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015; Zhai, Raver, & Gooze, 2011). Main factors that directly relate

to the quality of early educational experiences, which include teacher sensitivity and positive developmental outcomes, are linked (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007; Helburn, 1995; NICHD, ECCRN, 2005). Teachers who are engaged and connected with children have significant and lasting effects on outcomes of children (Lamb, 1998), such as gains in language and literacy (Early et al. 2005; Howes et al. 2008). Teachers who demonstrate sensitivity toward children are able to help them develop social-emotional competence (Belsky & Fearon, 2008; Berlin, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Supportive relationships, where teacher sensitivity is embedded, have also been shown to be associated with protecting children who are at risk for school failure (Hamre & Pianta 2005) and helping them develop positive peer relationships (Burchinal, Peisner - Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). It is beneficial for preschool children to have a sensitive teacher because sensitive teachers are an integral part of successful and lasting positive child outcomes in all major domains of development. Sensitive teachers have lasting impacts on children well after the preschool years and have shown to provide high levels of cognitive stimulation and support (Halle, et al. 2011; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; Pianta, et al. 2005). Improvements in climate will not only improve child outcomes but may reinforce a teacher's enjoyment of teaching and commitment to the profession (Jennings, 2009).

### **Areas of Inquiry**

The present case study explores the experiences of the teachers at an urban elementary school in a southeastern state in the United States exclusively serving pre-kindergarten children, ages (three to five years). This project does not seek to explore whether or not a teacher is sensitive. Instead, this project focuses on the way in which teachers describe teacher sensitivity and what helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive in the classroom. Specifically, this project

focuses on how teachers describe their path to developing and nurturing sensitivity. The following areas of inquiry will guide this study:

- 1) How does a teacher describe his/her journey to becoming a sensitive teacher?
- 2) What do teachers say helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive?

The results of this study have practical implications for the design of early childhood learning environments and the recruitment, training, and retention of teachers. Findings in this project include characteristics of sensitive teachers and identify components of organizational climate that influences a teacher's ability to be sensitive illuminating their perspectives. Ultimately, the hope is that there is a deeper understanding of the role of the ECE teacher and early learning environments will include the teacher as an essential component of an ideal learning space for children.

### **Definition of Terms**

- Developmentally appropriate practices – Approach to teaching, grounded in research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education ([www.NAEYC.org](http://www.NAEYC.org). 6-15-16).
- Developmental outcomes – Characteristics that contribute to positive outcomes for youth and adults in three main areas: social: forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships; cognitive and language: thinking and communicating one's thoughts; and behavior: following the rules and expectations of society ([www.rti.org](http://www.rti.org). 06-15-16).
- Organizational climate – Staff's collective perceptions of what the organization is like, in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes, perceived supportiveness, procedures, and routines (Denison, 1996; Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Jorde-Bloom, 2015).

- Preschool teacher – Instructs children birth to five-years-old in activities designed to promote social, physical, intellectual growth needed for primary school in preschool, day care center, or other child development facility. Plans individual and group activities to stimulate growth in language, social, and motor skills, such as learning to listen to instructions, playing with others, and using play equipment. May be required to have certification from the state.
- Organizational culture – The implied values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that are held within an organization (Cameron and Quinn, 1999; Louis, 1985; Schein, 2004).
- Teacher sensitivity – Interactions that show consistent expectations, a positive regard for children, and synchronized interactions with students. (Buhs, Rudasill, Kalutskaya, & Griesse, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman, et al. 2003).

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

An emotionally supportive environment for pre-kindergarten children must include a teacher who has the ability to respond sensitively to children's emotional, social and academic needs (Brock & Curby, 2014). Creating an emotionally supportive environment that promotes positive academic outcomes makes teacher sensitivity an important focus of early childhood education. Sensitive teachers share many qualities. Teachers who are highly sensitive show more adaptive communication and socialization skills (Hamre et al. 2014). Sensitive teaching has been linked to children having an increased ability to focus their attention on something while simultaneously performing another task and the ability to plan effectively (Finch et al. 2015). Skills such as communication, socialization, and attentiveness are essential for preschoolers to master prior to entering into kindergarten (Denham, Zinsser, & Brown, 2013; Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012; Torres, Domitrovich, & Bierman (2015).

The need for qualified teachers equipped with the ability to respond sensitively to children is essential for ensuring children have a quality early childhood educational experience. The proportion of three to six-year-old children who attended center-based early childhood care and education programs has increased from 55 to 61 percent between the years of 2007 and 2012 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2014). Although many children under the age of three do not have access to high quality preschool, half of our nation's preschool children attend some type of early childhood setting (Davis & Bauman, 2013). The U.S. Department of Labor forecasts that with a continued increase in enrollment and high employment turnover in this field, there will be a need of at least a 14 percent increase of teachers. This will, result in over 76,400 jobs and over 100,000 preschool teachers needing bachelor's degrees, making the need for a qualified employee in the classroom necessary

(Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2014). Research indicates that the ways in which teachers interact with children will determine how they develop over time. Together, these studies suggest that there is a need to have a teacher in the classroom who can provide opportunities for academic achievement along with emotional knowledge. There is a critical need to understand what types of supports are located within the school to facilitate this environment and what qualities lie within the teacher to foster this learning. There are factors that exist within the environment that are likely to shape these developments.

### **Teacher Sensitivity and the Work Environment**

From an ecological perspective, teacher sensitivity is viewed from the context of the work environment. In this microsystem, the “proximal processes” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) involve interactions with three central features of the environment, persons, objects, and symbols. Bronfenbrenner underscores the notion that a person’s developmentally relevant characteristics can be applied as well to the developmentally relevant features of significant others (Bronfenbrenner, 1993a, 1993b). This can be the belief system of parents, mentors, spouses, and close friends and associates. Their belief systems can interact with the developing person and affect their development. It is appropriate to apply the development of sensitivity in teachers to the proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner describes. Teacher sensitivity may develop positively or negatively as the person interacts with others in the work environment.

The ecological environment surrounding the developing person may be an underlying factor or force in the person's ability to exhibit sensitivity. The Center for Child Care Workforce highlights the need to focus on the work environment (2004). The perception of the organization, in other words, organizational climate, can function independently as an object included in the proximal processes (person, objects, and symbols) as a reciprocal interaction with the developing



person in connection with his/her development of sensitivity. I am looking to understand teacher sensitivity as defined by the early childhood teacher and the organizational influences (organizational climate) that impact teacher sensitivity through the lens of the teacher. There has been much research centered on classroom quality, but few studies look at the outside features of the classroom, such as structural and interpersonal features, (Zinsser et.al. 2014) in relation to this phenomenon (Zinsser et al. 2016).

Understanding how the ecological system of an organization's work environment and childcare quality are related can provide a foundation for improving quality by focusing on teachers' needs so they can do their jobs efficiently (Lower & Cassidy, 2007). Bloom (1996) used the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES) to compare organizational climate of child care centers that were accredited (NAEYC) to those that were not and found that there were notable differences within the ten dimensions of organizational climate regarding job commitment, staff turnover, and teachers' current and desired levels of decision-making influence. Ekholm and Hedin (1987) found that child care organizational climate (attitudes and teamwork) affect teacher interactions with children, which they described as either present or future focused. Teachers who exhibited more teamwork were more active in planning and interacting with children during play while being flexible to their needs. Although sensitive teaching has been related to positive benefits for children, less is known about what factors in the organization in which they work may or may not contribute to teacher sensitivity. This is important because how a teacher perceives the climate of the organization where he/she works may affect their emotions in the classroom and their social-emotional teaching practices (Zinsser, et al. 2016).

The climate surrounding teachers' workplaces should be a high priority (Eklund, 2009) where teachers' passions are allowed to flourish, and supportive behavior is an institutional norm because preschool children are spending time in early childhood settings outside the family home. The Center for Childcare Workforce (2004) highlights the need to focus on the work environment as it relates to its long-term impact on childcare quality. Approximately 61 percent of preschool-aged children are in a center-based environment spending an average of 35 hours per week in this type of setting (Child Care Aware of America, 2014). In the organizations' standards for professional contexts, the American Federation of Teachers state that both the physical and structural elements of schools must be considered when determining what types of environments help support teacher and children's ability to thrive ([www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)). Thriving consists not only of academic health but social-emotional health. Children with a healthy social-emotional competence have more success in school, make more friends, and achieve higher on assessment measures (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

Proximal contexts (i.e. an individual classroom, teachers, and peer group) and larger and more distal features of the early childhood environment influence children attending early childhood programs. These include structural characteristics related to policies and resources (hiring decisions, teacher compensation, and professional development opportunities) and interpersonal features (teacher job satisfaction and peer support) (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Chazan-Cohen, 2016, p. 268). When teachers are more content in the workplace, which includes their work conditions, they tend to be more committed to their profession (Jorde-Bloom, 1988; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988).

The teacher's perception of the work environment, or the organizational climate, appears to have some connections to the quality of the teacher's work. When teachers experience high

stress, they are more likely to express frequent negative emotions, such as anger, depression, and sadness (Feldman, Greenbaum, & Yirmiya, 1999) that translate into a negative model for children's emotional regulation and increase the tendency of aggressive behaviors in children (Ramsden and Hubbard, 2002). A predictor of teacher behavior and instructional practice in the classroom is thought to be emotions (Frenzel, 2014).

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

*Ecological Systems Theory* provides a framework for the current study. An ecological approach is required in order to understand teacher sensitivity. Organizational characteristics of early childhood teacher settings are identified as predictors of teacher sensitivity in center-based childcare using the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS), (Arnett, 1986; Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007). Qualities related to teacher sensitivity include accreditation status of the center, center size, and overall program quality. The teachers in the (Gerber, et al. 2007) survey indicated that they received additional training, and they perceived the health of the center to be good. There were secondary factors, such as amount of teacher training, size of the center, and perceived organizational health that predicted teacher sensitivity. Organizational predictors of teacher sensitivity in center-based childcare have been examined by the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS, Arnett, 1986). It has been widely used in research to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B); Mollborn & Blalock, 2012; Early Head Start Research Project (Love et al. 2004); Head Start Family and Child Experiences Surveys (FACES; Bracken & Fischel, 2006); and Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Case Study (Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreo; LI-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). A complete understanding of teacher sensitivity would require a multi-

faceted approach to investigating the teacher's perspective as well as the organizational structure and climate.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) highlights interconnections in development. Context, culture, and history binds development (Darling, 2007, p. 204). Ecological systems theory situates an individual as the center of development in a series of nested systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro, and chrono-systems) that the individual interacts via proximal processes. Further developing on the abstract ideas of Lewin (1917, 1931, 1935); and Elder's work on life-course development (1974), Bronfenbrenner (1977) outlined a conceptual model of the psychological space that exists within our development which interacts together and influences the developing individual. With the teacher at the center of the system, the model can be useful for describing and explaining the processes that inform and develop teacher sensitivity. Multiple contexts and influences within these systems impacts teacher development. Teacher sensitivity is likewise a product of these multiple influences. A more detailed description of the model is examined to uncover how this model might inform the exploration of teacher sensitivity and how it applies to the present project.

**Components of the Theory.** Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory describes an individual's development within multiple contexts and his/her perceived environmental influences, actions, and relationships. A series of "differentiated regions some embedded in others, some inter-connected, others isolated, but all interacting to steer behavior and development of the person" defines the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 203). This theory of development includes four systems. These systems include interconnections among people in the setting, and events that occur among people (p. 207). These interconnections define the environment surrounding them. Adult contexts are the personal, highly influential

environments (e.g. family, milieu, work colleagues and culture, civic commitments and associations) nested within the larger macro contexts of life (e.g. the sociocultural, political, ideological environments (Hoare, 2008).

To understand the relationship between the pre-kindergarten teacher and his/her development of teacher sensitivity, an overview of ecological systems theory is necessary. Bronfenbrenner (2005) asserts that environment affects individuals differently. Specifically, he stated, “Particular environmental conditions have been shown to produce different developmental consequences depending on the personal characteristics of individuals living in that environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p.109). Teacher sensitivity may be a process that influences one’s development by forces emanating from multiple settings and from the relations among those settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 817; Dalli, Miller, & Urban, 2011; Gabarino, 1992). Different interrelated systems in the process-person-context model can explain how teacher sensitivity might be examined (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 115). In addition, events that occur indirectly in the teacher’s ecosystem affect their development and shape who they are and the degree to which their emotions, thoughts, and feelings are expressed and displayed in the classroom and among the other members of the school. The indirect processes take up the mental space in an individual’s phenomenological world, where reality, fantasy, imagination, and unreality come together (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This life space is more important than the actual surroundings and make the teacher’s interpretation of the interaction with these interrelated systems important.

**Microsystem.** The first level in this series of nested mental structures is the *microsystem*. This system includes immediate relationships that an individual has, such as organizations in which they interact. It includes settings that are most proximal to the person (Hoare, 2008). A

microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit, engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645). The outcome depends on the type of relationships that form between the individual and the systems and people whom they are connected. These relationships may include the connection a teacher has with his/her students and how he/she relates to them; thus, teacher sensitivity may be impacted by the relationships they have with children and other important relationships in their immediate world.

In the examination of a teacher's development of sensitivity, the microsystem includes the most direct influences on the individual's development of teaching knowledge, nurturing disposition, and sensitivity. The teacher's understanding, development, and expression of sensitivity places the teacher at the center of the model. The microsystem will likely be his/her neighborhood of residence, family, peers, religious affiliation, and access to mental and physical health services. This design would keep with the person-process-context model (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983) where developmental processes are seen as a function of context. It is the "interconnections between people in a similar setting where the context can be studied by the context in which activities are being conducted" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 207). "A teacher's "behavior, thoughts, and actions are influenced by others in the microsystem, and so too are others affected by the individual" (Cross & Hong, 2012, p. 959). Throughout his writings, Bronfenbrenner underscores the importance of the microsystem as having the greatest effect on children's development (Hoare, 2008). The teacher's microsystem includes family, friends, home, community groups, and friendships (Benner & Graham, 2009) that create reciprocal and

multi-dimensional relationships between each other (Cross & Hong, 2012). The different relationships that are experienced by the teacher may influence interactions with children. “These situations in which the teacher is physically present and has face-to-face contact with others includes interactions at the classroom level with children, colleagues, and parents” (Baker, 2018, p. 233-234). It is these interactions in the microsystem that may affect sensitivity.

**Mesosystem.** The *mesosystem* includes two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 208) and focuses on the relationships between microsystems (Baker, 2018). The connections between these interrelationships with children, colleagues, and parents serve to influence the continual development of the teacher. The connections underscore how her abilities to remain in touch with all of the different links force her to continually adapt to the environment (Benner & Graham, 2009).

**Exosystem.** The *exosystem* includes those people and places where the individual does not have direct contact, such as a workplace, a school board or city council, or extended family members. The exosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 24). The teacher does not interact directly with professional organizations, larger school system policies, local, state, and national government mandates. These entities influence and create policy that directly affects teachers in the classroom, having positive and negative implications for teachers and ultimately, children (Benner & Graham, 2009). For the early childhood teacher, this may include the workplace of a significant other, the local, state, federal government policies or mandates, the activities of the school board, the principal's goals and vision, and the events that occur in other colleagues' lives.

Settings in which the teacher is not directly involved may help shape how he/she describes teacher sensitivity and may help him/her to identify what helps or hinders its understanding, development, and expression.

**Macrosystem.** The *macrosystem* encompasses overarching patterns of stability, at the level of subculture and or the culture as a whole, in forms of social organization and associated belief and life styles (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 210). The macrosystem is the outermost context that influences an individual's development, but in which the individual does not directly have contact. There are associated patterns of development situated within these larger social networks. Societies have subcultures that tend to follow the same patterns of ideology and lifestyles that are reflective of the larger mainstream culture.

Teachers who work in the same school, live in the same city, and in the same area of the county/parish tend to experience similarities and exhibit the same patterns of interactions with children in the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1977) insisted that the nature of our scientific work to understand the ecological environment that a particular group finds itself, in particular, the exo- and mesosystem, influences directly and delimits the kinds of activities and relations that are possible to children and those responsible for their care (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 211). Bronfenbrenner urged scientists to engage in experiments that transform or alter practices and beliefs about the prevailing macrosystems in which they live. Cultural values and ideologies about children and early childhood education may shape a teacher's description of sensitivity and what he/she thinks helps or hinders his/her ability to be sensitive to children.

The systems interact and change over time. The person shapes his/her social context, and the social context, shapes his/her development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Personal attributes encourage or discourage reactions from other people who facilitate or damage



psychological development (Miller, 2011, p.206). Bronfenbrenner placed emphasis on the processes by which the person and his/her context directly affect each other through the characteristics of the person and the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). “Situating practitioners at the center of the model ensures that their voices are essential in the research conversation, thus offering a counter-perspective to research on teacher learning that focuses on child outcomes data and thus downplays the voices of practitioners (Baker, 2018, p.233).

### **History of Sensitivity**

The empirical investigation of sensitivity in response to young children began with the study of parents and then began to shift to other contexts (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). Much of the data within the last thirty years has focused on parent quality in relation to sensitivity (Baumrind, 1989; Dis, Gershoff, Meunier, & Miller, 2004; Farah & Noble, 2005; Leckman, Mayes, & Cohen, 2002; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Sorkhabi, 2005). Parent-child interactions have a major influence on children’s social-emotional well-being (Bocknek, Brophy-Herb, & Banerjee, 2009; Cole, 2003; Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Kim & Kochaska, 2012). Many of the factors that contribute to caregiving sensitivity in parent-child relationships (such as psychological well-being, social support, and so on) are likely to influence teacher sensitivity (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2006, p. 328). Research has shown that children exposed to sensitive and responsive relationships in center-based care demonstrate more highly developed cognitive, language, and social skills (Manlove, et al. 2008; CQCOST, 1995; McCartney, 1984; McCartney, Scarr, Philips, & Grajek, 1985, NICHD, 1999).

Nearly two decades ago, a major national report radically influenced early childhood policies and practices, and further validated ecological systems theory and the need for sensitive

teachers. The groundbreaking work *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000) drew conclusions about the critical dimensions of early development (language, cognitive, emotional, social, regulatory, and moral). This report suggested that these dimensions required focused attention and in particular, policies and practices regarding early childhood. This report connected early life experiences and early development.

The teacher, situated in an early childhood setting, as well as the parent at home, are now a focus of policy makers in an attempt to impact child outcomes (*Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 2000). One of the core principles in *Neurons to Neighborhoods* is that development can be altered during early childhood by “effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection, thereby shifting the odds in favor of more adaptive outcomes” (p.4). This reflects the shift in the way we understand development, that it is not nature or nurture alone, but the child is developing in the context of both genetics and their environment and the interventions we make going forward need to considerate of this finding (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Sensitivity is important and influential in building early childhood programs and merging the nature and nurture influences on the child. Another core concept of development identified in this report is that “Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience” (p.3). A combination of a caring and educational environment ensures a child will have the opportunity for the best outcome. “The time is overdue for society to recognize the significance of out-of-home relationships for young children, to esteem those who care for them when their parents are not available” (p.7). This led to the conclusion that sensitive and responsive caregiving is associated with positive child development outcomes and school readiness (NICHD, 2003; Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). The early childhood setting differs considerably from other environments in which children form important early

relationships, such as home or childcare settings (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Pianta, 2006). Wilcox-Herzog & Ward (2004) surveyed teachers to examine the relationship between teachers' beliefs and intentions regarding teacher-child interactions, and in addition, found that a teacher's beliefs influence how he/she responds to children and that some teachers felt that training and job titles influenced their classroom behaviors. Research conducted on responsive and sensitive caregiving found that the way teachers' think about children and understand and interpret their behavior may be very important in understanding teacher sensitivity when the quality of the work environment is poor (Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans (2007).

**Sensitivity and Learning Outcomes.** A teacher influences children's outcomes by their ability to respond in an emotionally supportive and instructional manner (Williford, Maier, Downer, Pianta, and Howes (2013). Teacher sensitivity is perhaps the most important yet overlooked quality in an effective teacher (Gerber et al. 2007) and its' influence on children's social, emotional, and academic development is evident (Helburn, 1995; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). A sensitive teacher contributes to the overall quality of the early childhood program and is a necessary factor in positive outcomes for children (Pianta, 1999). Teacher sensitivity is an element of a quality interaction that a teacher has with a child, and this concept has an impact on children's physical, social/emotional, and academic development (Helburn, 1995; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). Research has shown that children experience benefits on multi-levels, including advanced cognitive, language, and emotional health, and social skills (Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans, 2007) (Cost) (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 1999). When associated with a responsive and sensitive caregiver, considerable research has demonstrated that children's cognitive and social skills are positively impacted (Burchinal, Roberts, Nabors, & Bryant, 1996; Burchinal, Roberts, Riggins, Zeisel, et al. 2000;

McCartney, 1984; NICHD ECCRN, 1998, 2000, 2002). Sensitive caregiving enhances academic skill development, particularly language advancements in addition to social and emotional learning (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002).

The interactions between young children and early childhood educators are critical to the development of children's social-emotional competence (Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, and Gooze, 2015, p.57). Children who experience a classroom characterized as a high-quality environment: child-focused, positive interactions, and an environment with high emotional support, which includes teacher sensitivity tend to be rated as more competent (Burchinal, Roberts, et al. 2000; Pianta et al. 2002) and have fewer behavior problems later in elementary school (NICHD 2003). Positive relationships between sensitive teachers and children may help the overall social and emotional outcomes for children (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007). The quality of the attachment formed between caregiver and child play an important role in children's social-emotional development (Barnas & Cummings, 1994; Howes, 2000; Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). This quality corresponds to the intensity of the response of a teacher, a key component of sensitivity.

Teacher sensitivity has been shown to relate to children's social competence, emotional adjustment (Finch, Johnson, & Phillips, 2015), math, and language skills in the kindergarten classroom and has been shown to look differently across classrooms (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Sensitive teacher-child interactions form the basis of the development of assistive relationships in the classroom (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997) and their attitudes and beliefs about children influence educational outcomes. Children rely on the teacher as a safe person when they need reassurance or comforting (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, (2008). Teacher

sensitivity reduces the negative impacts of harsh parenting (Mortensen and Barnett, 2018). Howes et al. (1994) found that teachers who were sensitive had children in their care who were more socially competent with their peers. Children with bold temperament styles are more self-reliant, have fewer negative behaviors, and display fewer off-task behaviors compared to less sensitive teaching styles (Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2002). Interactions between the teacher and the children in his/her care impact a child's overall development and future learning; establishing cycles of social success and failures depending on the experience a child has (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2007; NICHD 2002; Deater-Deckard, Pinkerton, & Skarr, 1996). One reason for this may be that the interactions children receive from teachers vary (Pluess & Belsky, 2009; 2010). Teacher-child relationships can serve as a buffer against negative experiences at home (Helburn, 1999; NICHD ECCRN, 2005). In particular, supportive teacher-child relationships can help at-risk children overcome negative effects of punitive parenting (Maccoby and Martin (1983) Helburn, 1995; NICHD NCCRN, 2005). A sensitive style of teaching may support children who appear to be withdrawn and create sensitive classroom environments, which may help improve the effects of shyness and school adjustment (Avant, Gazelle, & Faldowski, 2011; Gazelle, 2006; Pianta, 1999).

Warm, positive, and responsive teachers who respond in an appropriate manner to children may help them develop better self-regulation skills and assist children with working independently in the classroom (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). A dependable predictor of children's social and emotional development, caregiver sensitivity is well-documented (Manlove et al. 2008; CQCOST, 1995; McCartney, 1984; McCartney, Scarr, Philips, & Grajek, 1985, Lamb, 1998; NICHD, 1999).

Improving quality in early childhood education through policy and practice requires that we put a spotlight on teacher-child interactions as well as the circumstances likely to produce effective interactions (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). The context of social relationships embed children's emotions and attention (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kopp, 1982; Thompson, 1994) and teacher-child interactions are a base for other relationships in the school setting. Children appear to use their relationship with their teacher as a base for orienting to and exploring with peer interactions (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994, p. 272). Research has shown that when teachers interact with children offering more suggestions, asking open-ended questions, and making elaborative statements, children exhibit higher levels of social and cognitive developmental competence (Clarke-Stewart, 1984; Erwin, Carpenter, & Kontos, 1993; Pellegrini, 1984). Nurturing and sensitive early childhood teachers result in lasting positive effects for the teacher, child, and the community (Curby, LoCasale-Crouch, Konold, Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, & Barbarin, 2009).

When placed in a high-quality setting, a child in this environment can develop greater language and cognitive gains beyond the preschool years. Better language skills help a child to communicate their needs to adults and engage in social conversations with peers. When teachers are more sensitive, children in their care have higher language development scores, rate higher in attachment security, and are more sociable with peers (Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1995; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989). Teachers who are highly sensitive are also often more likely to engage in effective language-stimulation practices (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014, p. 1257). Hamre et al. (2014) examined 325 preschool teachers as they participated in a class on teacher-child interactions and received coaching and found that children in classrooms

with more responsive teaching showed early literacy and language gains, better memory skills, and decreased conflict among teachers and children.

The language that a preschool teacher uses with children has been shown to be the best predictor of cognitive and language development in children (NICHD, 2002). The teacher can use language in a thoughtful way to respond to cues from the child by acknowledging what a child needs and assist a child in constructing his/her world. More stimulation from the teacher, asking questions, responding to vocalizations, and other forms of talking, were linked to somewhat better language and cognitive development (p. 12). Linguistic parts of an environment are shown to have a strong association with children's language and cognitive development (McCartney, 1984; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000). Responding in a meaningful and thoughtful way will help the child to receive positive messages, process the messages cognitively, then internalize the language, which in turn, can shape the way a child behaves, thinks about, and responds to his/her environment (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Journal of European Psychology Students, 2010). Table 2 lists these activities that fit the definition of teacher sensitivity (responds to cues, responds appropriately, positively, and quickly), and help to establish the relationship between teacher sensitivity and long-term positive child outcomes (Manlove, et al. 2007). Language is associated with responding positively to children, which reflects a teacher's sincerity, which is a component of teacher sensitivity. Teacher sensitivity is significant to the development of children's social-emotional competence and academic success, particularly in relating to gains in language and math skills (NICHD, 2002).

Caregiver sensitivity, which is considered to be a process, is well documented as a dependable predictor of children's outcomes (Lamb, 1998). Further research is needed to

understand the teacher's perspective about what it means to be sensitive. The process of measuring sensitivity is not a linear one. It is likely a messy and irregular task. However, understanding sensitive caregiving is important to the early childhood field because we must select teachers who can do the job effectively to benefit the most children with the most need, from the most vulnerable of populations, with the bleakest potential outcomes. These children deserve to have teachers who are committed to establishing meaningful interactions in the moment-to-moment experiences that encompass the school day.

Later academic achievement and social-emotional development have been linked to teacher sensitivity (Gerber, et al. 2007). The need for employing early childhood teachers who display sensitivity is crucial, as it impacts the overall quality of the early childhood environment, the immediate and future learning experiences for the child, and promotes social, emotional, language, and math competence which is critical for successful school readiness and later behavioral and academic development (Werner, 1996; Masten, 2001). There is a need to examine other elements of classrooms and classroom interactions that contribute to children's development (Zaslow, Martinez-Beck, Tout, & Halle, 2011). Although there has been a large amount of research on classroom quality, the analyses are typically only nested as children within teachers, but not teachers in centers (Zinsser and Curby, 2014, p.3).

**Characteristics and Definitions of Teacher Sensitivity.** Researchers define teacher sensitivity as warm attentive and responsive behaviors toward children that acknowledges their emotions, meets their academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs, and anticipates problems (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Faiza, 2014, p. 1259). The concept of teacher sensitivity has developed over time from multiple constructs that encompass how and to what degree a teacher responds to children. In the following review of



literature, different characteristics and definitions of teacher sensitivity are presented which center on the sincerity, the intensity of response, and the timing in which these interactions occur.

The Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) is one of the most widely used studies (Mollborn & Blalock, 2012; Love, et al. 2004, Bracken & Fischel, 2006; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreo, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010) to measure teacher-child interactions, where the essence of sensitivity is found. This scale, like the foundations of teacher sensitivity, were founded on qualities associated with parent-child interactions. With the development of this scale, there begins to be characteristics of sensitivity that emerge from and have been widely used to describe the qualities of caregiver interactions. Arnett (1989) in a study of Head Start programs, created the concept of positive interaction, reflecting warmth and enthusiasm as key qualities of a sensitive teacher, or the sincerity in which he/she responds. This is relevant to this study since it begins to define the qualities of teacher sensitivity. Researchers have linked teacher warmth as an expression of the qualities of being nurturing, accepting, and having respect for children (Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992) which are qualities also associated with teacher sensitivity and can take on many forms (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Sensitive teachers are aware of the simple and complex individual needs of children and can positively respond in a manner that helps with overall children's learning (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Teacher warmth is the degree of expression of this awareness, or its intensity. In reviewing the literature on teacher sensitivity, the key components of a sensitive teacher reflect when they respond to cues, (timing), the degree to which teachers respond (intensity), and how, or in what manner are they able to respond (sincerity) (Arnett, 1989; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; NICHD, 2003, Pianta 1999, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Curby, Rimm-

Kaufman, Ponitz, 2009; Downer, Sabol & Hamre, 2010; Hamre, Pianta, Downer, Decoster, Jones, Brown, Capella, & Kaefer (2013); Hartz & Williford 2015). Cues are often present before a child displays need. This is a feature not only in classrooms but is a principle of human social behavior, and as Crick & Dodge (1996) note, the extent to which we respond and attend to social cues influences our interactions. “Early childhood teachers notice and respond to children’s cues in moment-to-moment bouts of attending and response” (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Faiza, 2014, p. 1260). Responding to children’s cues is reflective of a consistently warm and positive sensitive teacher (Buhs, Rudasill, Kalutskaya, & Griesse, 2015, p.13). Upon review of literature surrounding sensitive teaching, three similarities emerge—*sincerity*, *intensity*, and *timing*.

**Sincerity.** A sensitive teacher engages in positive interactions, is aware of the individual needs of children, responds in a positive manner to those needs, is less detached, and uses fewer punitive measures (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhes, Snell & La Paro, 2003; Vermani, 2009). Sincerity is the degree to which a sensitive teacher displays value and respect in his/her response to children.

**Intensity.** The literature seems to confirm this notion of “intensity” as being a key component of teacher sensitivity. When teachers do offer comfort, the approach is not only to resolve an immediate issue, but rather to engage in back-and-forth exchanges that assist children with the construction of knowledge and sends a message of “consistent expectations” (Hamre, et al. 2014) that reassures their attachment (Bowlby, 1973). Teachers are often busily engaged in multiple tasks while simultaneously engaging with children. This multi-tasking can lead to a teacher not effectively engaging with children in an intense manner that resolves their issues or reassures them emotionally, although this is a key part of their response. Intensity is the depth of a response that a sensitive teacher displays in her interactions with children.

**Timing.** Teachers will usually acknowledge a child who needs help, but there can be a delay in the response based on other responsibilities and demands of children in the classroom. A teacher who is sensitive engages in interactions that result from identifying children's cues and effectively meeting their needs in a manner that anticipates problems and what children need before they verbally require assistance (Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhes, Snell & La Paro (2003). Researchers with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Child Care Research Network (2003) defined sensitivity as the extent to which a caregiver is child-focused and one who demonstrates appropriate and immediate responses to children's expressions and signals. Responding in a timely manner is a characteristic of a sensitive teacher, which sends the child a message that he/she is valued and that there is a sense of urgency to meet their needs as quickly as possible. Table 1 shows relevant definitions and characteristics of teacher sensitivity and how they overlap with one another.

As Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, and Downer (2007) suggest "Education research, policy, and practice are faced with the daunting task of unpacking the 'black box' of classroom process-the observable, everyday classroom experiences that contribute to students' development of academic and social competencies" (p. 18).

Researchers approach this black box in different ways and come to different conclusions. However, in the case of teacher sensitivity, most researchers have come to similar conclusions about the definition of teacher sensitivity. Pianta et al. (2002) suggests that teachers should be aware of their ability to notice and respond to cues in those critical moments and use that awareness to modify their instruction. Sensitive interactions, such as those characterized as being responsive to children, noticing their cues for emotional and instructional support, and responding positively to their needs represent a larger relationship system (Rimm-Kaufman,

Table 1. Field Characteristics and Definitions of Teacher Sensitivity

Relevant Literature	Sincerity, Intensity, Timing
Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog (1997)	how warm (intensity) and attentive, which includes being quick (timing) to comfort a child in a time of need
Pianta, (1999, 2003)	awareness of and the responsivity (intensity) that teachers have to children's academic and emotional concerns
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2002) Study for Early Child Care ( <a href="http://secc.rt.org/instdoc.doc">http://secc.rt.org/instdoc.doc</a> )	the extent to which a caregiver is child-focused (sincerity) and one who demonstrates appropriate and quick responses (timing) to children's expressions and signals
La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, (2004)	be able to respond in a positive manner (sincerity) to those needs as they are exhibited which helps with overall children's learning
Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhees, Snell, & La Paro (2003)	having a positive regard for children (sincerity), and engaging in interactions (intensity) that identify children's cues and are able to meet their needs accordingly
Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, (2008)	plans for problems before they arise (timing); reacts in a quick (timing), soothing, and responsive manner (intensity); is consistently aware (timing) of what students need and when they need it (timing) and provides support to them accordingly (intensity)
Vermani (2009)	engaging in more positive interactions, being less detached (intensity), and using fewer punitive measures (sincerity)
Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, and Faiza (2014)	"responsiveness to children's academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs (intensity), anticipates problems (timing), provides assistance (intensity), and acknowledges emotions (sincerity)" (p.1259)
Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil (2014)	to adequately notice (timing) and respond to cues (intensity) in moment to moment situations of attending (intensity) and responding appropriately (sincerity) make efforts to approach children in a child-centered manner (sincerity, intensity) (p.1257)
Buhs, Rudasill, Kalutskaya, & Griesse (2015)	teachers who are sensitive are consistently warm (intensity), positive (sincerity), and are able to respond appropriately (timing) to children's cues (p.13)

Voorhees, Snell, & La Paro, 2003) of higher quality, which is centered around interactions between children and adults that lead to positive developmental outcomes (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Morrison & Connor, 2002; Pianta, 2006; Rutter & Maughan, 2002); and which influence instruction that precipitates positive development, which has social, behavioral, and cognitive benefits in the early years and through adolescence and adulthood (Curby, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). A study by Howes & Smith (1995), determined that when teachers are a source of support for children, the children are able to engage with their peers and are comfortable exploring the classroom environment. Teachers who are more sensitive to a child's needs, cues, and abilities may be more effective at guiding children's engagement (Rimm-Kaufman, Voorhees, Snell, & La Paro, 2003, p. 152).

Improving the work setting may contribute to improving the sensitivity and responsiveness of caregiver interactions by helping teachers to behave in ways that support children's developmental needs. This could be a more economical and expedient path to quality than investing in more education and training for teachers. Teachers in the same work setting may perceive levels of support very differently. Organizational climate is the term used for the way that a person regards his/her work environment. Adult experiences of the environment, including how supportive it is for adults, may be an important factor in determining what happens for children (Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). This chapter will provide a review of literature on teacher sensitivity, its definitions, and influence on critical periods of early childhood development, as well as discuss the current thinking and historical perspectives on teacher sensitivity. The benefits of having a sensitive teacher have been established. It is widely accepted that a sensitive teacher is able to adequately notice and respond to cues in

moment to moment situations of attending to children and responding appropriately and are more likely to undertake productive language stimulation practices (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014, p. 1257) and make efforts to approach children in a child-centered manner (p.1270).

Existing literature connects early childhood teacher sensitivity and positive learning outcomes of preschool children (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002) and program quality (Gerber et al. 2007). As more children spend time in early childhood settings, it is important to understand the nature of the relationships they have with their caregivers (Hartz & Williford, 2015). Sensitive teaching includes being able to “respond in a quick and comforting manner which is the opposite of detached teachers who are generally unresponsive or harsh teachers who are quick to punish” (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997, p. 6). The research literature connects sensitivity with program quality and children’s learning outcomes. Research conducted on responsive and sensitive caregiving has shown that children experience benefits on multi-levels, including advanced cognitive, language, and emotional health, and social skills (Manlove, et al. 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 1999). There are long-term positive effects associated with high quality sensitive caregiving (NICHD, 2003). Children benefit from a high-quality early childhood experience, regardless of other discriminating factors, such as mother’s education level, race/ethnicity, language background, and socio-economical disadvantages (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002). Early experiences are linked to cognitive function, which may build a child's resistance to the negative effects of potential psychological stressors (Farah & Noble, 2005; Leckman, Mayes, & Cohen, 2002). It is evident from the

research that teacher sensitivity is linked to positive child outcomes, in relation to their academic and emotional competence.

### **Sensitivity and Program Quality**

The quality of the program may have an impact on teacher sensitivity. The early childhood setting differs considerably from other environments in which children form important early relationships, such as home or childcare settings (Jerome, Hamre, and Pianta, 2008; Pianta, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (2006) identified teacher sensitivity as a key component of an early childhood experience.

Studies that have concentrated on quality care in preschool identify good caregiving involves following the child's lead and being sensitive and responsive during interactions (Cox & Pale, 197; NICHD, 2005). Quality includes pre-service training, professional development, and size and accreditation status. Programs must plan to create a culture of sensitivity for its newest members of the profession. Pre-service training and professional development programs for early childhood teachers must target key components of emotional support, which include providing a classroom that is conducive to learning, where children know what to expect and being able to provide support for those who may need greater attention, so children feel more secure with the teacher and the environment, and are able to attend to learning tasks (Brock & Curby, 2014).

Teachers and programs measure quality interactions and teacher interactions with children (p.45) differently (Hamre, Goffin, & Kraft-Sayre, 2009). Training, center size, and accreditation status have a connection to teacher sensitivity. Less sensitive teachers have been employed at non-accredited centers (Gerber, et al. 2007). A strong teacher-child connection is essential for the overall development of the child. Training and classroom quality is key in explaining how teachers can remain sensitive in spite of their depressive states, suggesting that

within settings, there appears to be complex clusters surrounded by multiple risks (Gerber et al. 2007). There is a positive relationship between the quality of management practices and the quality of learning environments (Lower & Cassidy, 2007). Teacher sensitivity requires a view from the perspective of the early childhood teacher so training and educating early childhood teachers can reflect their perspectives. Accountability among teachers and programs includes teacher sensitivity as a component of quality (Hamre, Goffin, & Kraft-Sayre, 2009) because there are significant outcomes associated with these interactions. Large numbers of children in preschool require researchers, administrators, and policy makers to examine ideal environments for preschoolers and to further study the quality of the relationships they have with caregivers. A better understanding of the contributions individual teacher and workplace factors make to the quality of care provided to our youngest children can ultimately lead the way to the improvement in the quality of care provided (Manlove, et al. 2007, p. 218).

The specific components of the organization related to teacher sensitivity are not well understood and warrant additional investigation. A high-quality early childhood program selects lead teachers who are trained and skilled in early childhood development. There is evidence to show that education level and the amount of training affords higher quality experiences for children (Arnett, 1989; NICHD ECCRN, 1999; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001; Whitebook, Sakai, & Howes, 2004). These findings are consistent with parenting research pertaining to interventions that affect quality of parental care (Cowna, Powell, & Cowan, 1998; Gross). The setting and conditions of the childcare itself may contribute to teaching behaviors (Gerber, et al. 2007). There is a need to explore how individual and contextual factors affects sensitive caregiving. In summary, teacher sensitivity is crucial to making sure children have positive academic and social outcomes (Pianta, 1999). Research has shown that child outcomes



improve through a combination of high-quality instructional methods and positive and responsive teaching techniques (Hamre, et al. 2014).

### **Measures of Teacher Sensitivity**

**Traditional.** Few measures of teacher sensitivity in the classroom are available for researchers (Colwell, Gordon, Fujimoto, Kaestner, & Korenman (2013). Measures have traditionally been embedded within a larger design used to measure an overall program, specifically looking at many components that encompass quality (Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, & Chase-Lansdale, 2004; Votruba-Drzal et al. 2010). These measures usually consider several dimensions that encompass a quality classroom and do not exclusively measure teacher sensitivity. There are few measures of teacher sensitivity that approach this topic through a qualitative method, presenting an illuminating case using interviewing and observation that will contribute to the definitions of teacher sensitivity and will encourage researchers to use non-traditional methods to explore the concept of teacher sensitivity. These measures are listed in the Table 2.

**The Arnett Classroom Interaction Scale (Arnett, 1989)/Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS).** The Arnett Classroom Interaction Scale (Arnett, 1989) has been widely used to measure teacher *sensitivity*, *harshness*, *detachment*, and *permissiveness* of teacher-child interactions (Arnett, 1989; ECLS-B; Mollborn and Blalock, 2012; Love, 2014; Bracken & Fischel, 2006; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreo, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). The CIS measures how warmly caregivers interact with children, as well as the quality of their communication, their enthusiasm, and their involvement. It focuses on global quality of social and instructional interactions between the caregiver and the child. The measure includes three subscales. Scale one is sensitivity, which includes ten items, scale two is harshness, in which

includes eight items, and scale three is detachment, in which has four items. Trained reliable scorers observe forty-five minutes of free-play. This scale is rated on a four-point system: (1) never occurred to (4) frequently occurred during the observation. One positive aspect of the CIS includes connecting several research-based components that can then be tied together in a composite measure of quality (Doherty-Derkowski, 1995). However, critics suggest that the correlations between the CIS and child developmental outcomes are usually small, and there are only a few studies establishing its validity (Colwell, Gordon, Fujimoto, Kaestner, & Korenman, 2012). As with most measures of classroom quality, the CIS does not exclusively measure teacher-child sensitivity. The Arnett CIS has been used in numerous large-scale studies such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B); Mollborn & Blalock, 2012); Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (Love et al. 2004); Head Start Family and Child Experiences Surveys (FACES; Bracken & Fischel, 2006); and Welfare, Children and Families; A Three-City Study (Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreo, Li-Grining, & Chase-Landale, 2010).

**The Classroom Assessment Scoring System, (CLASS™), (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2002, 2005, 2008).** Children's social and emotional functioning can be linked to effective classroom practices, (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS™) is designed to measure teaching interactions in the context of three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in classrooms in preschool through grade three. There are ten dimensions within three domains. The measurement of teacher sensitivity is embedded in the domain of emotional support. CLASS™ can be used as a component of an overall assessment program since it is reliable and has been tested many times (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). CLASS™ has been widely adopted and incorporated into 23 states'

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (<http://www.qris.compendium.org>, 2017). There are different versions for all age groups of children: infants, toddlers, pre-kindergarten, grades K-5, and grades 6-12.

The emotional support domain, in which teacher sensitivity is embedded, was designed from developmental theory, namely, attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Pianta, 1999) and self-determination theory (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), which have their roots in parent-child relationships. Attachment theory was developed from the examination of parents who provided consistent emotional support in a predictable manner within a safe context, which resulted in their children displaying more independent skills and being able to take risks more often when they knew a trusting adult was giving support (Ainsworth et al. 1978, Bowlby, 1973). In addition, self-determination theory suggests that children learn best when adults support their need to feel competent and independent (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). These theories situate teacher-sensitivity as a necessary component of social and emotional functioning in the classroom and a key element of effective classroom practice (Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, 2007). The complete CLASS observation will be completed and scored according to the instructions from the authors.

**Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998).** The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) was published in 1980 as a measure of child quality. It is a broad measure of the environment, including spatial, programmatic, and interpersonal features (Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, 1998, p.1). This measurement is designed for use with one classroom at a time, for children ages two and one-half through five years of age. The scale is composed of 43 items categorized into 7

subscales. There is an interaction subscale, which has one item that addresses staff-child interactions, but not specifically teacher-child sensitivity.

### **Organizational Climate**

The organizational climate is the collective overall perception of the work environment from within by its members. The study of organizational climate is situated in qualitative research methods by sharing experiences of individuals with the organization. This concept fits within ecological theory and is often used in the same context as organizational culture, although the two terms have different meanings.

**Historical Context.** Previous studies (Kim et al. 2009, Lower & Cassidy, 2007) suggest that a teacher can interact with children in a developmentally appropriate manner when they are working in a more supportive school climate. This is the essence of the ecological systems model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). If teachers perceive their work climate as challenging, they may be exhausted and less able to provide sensitive environments to their students (Hur, Jeon, & Buettner, 2015). Since the 1980s, the primary framework for studying organizational climate has been through qualitative research methods (McKenzie, 2015). Researchers using this method have been able to analyze the shared experiences of individuals (Schneider, 2000). Examining teachers' reports of organizational climate will add a new layer of knowledge and depth to the understanding of teacher sensitivity and its impact on child development. At the heart of this study are the teachers' perspectives, their understanding of teacher sensitivity, and how they navigate between the nested systems that define their lives. Climate situates itself in the person-environment theories of Kurt Lewin (1951) where a teacher's behavior is both a product of personal psychology and environmental circumstances. During a study to examine components of leadership behavior, (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939) the concept of

organizational climate in research first appeared. This is where ecological systems theory is rooted. The history of organizational climate also has its origin from the psychology of Lewin. Organizational climate in theory is the perception of experiences and beliefs within a person's organization. An individual's perceptions cannot be separated from his/her social context (Lewin, 1951). As it relates to the current study, it could be of interest to explore the experiences that teachers have in order to try to add depth to the understanding of how teacher sensitivity is developed and nurtured from their perspective.

To place more emphasis on the ecological model as a framework for this study, it is interesting to view Lewin's theory of person-context development. As Lewin watched soldiers march the beautifully landscaped fields in WWI, the theory of person-context developed. As a soldier in the back of the line, one could take in the beauty of the environment, the trees, and the scenic hills, relative to their position in the cavalry line. As Lewin observed soldiers get closer to the front lines, he noticed their perceptions of the environment changed, and what was once beautiful scenery became "camouflaged trees and hills that hid the enemy " (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 204). Organizational climate in a school, similar to that of the soldier's view of the scenic hills, is worth examining to provide further depth and insight into the concept of teacher sensitivity.

Organizational climate aligns closely with ecological framework. Organizational climate is a legitimate concept to explore when examining teacher sensitivity from the perspective of the teacher and its influences on teaching. Social context and individuals are connected (Lewin, 1951). Denison (1996) suggests that social processes influence climate. Lewinian theory "appears to be more useful for conceptualizing the influence of context on human behavior than for understanding the process by which social context develops" (Denison, 1996, p. 627).

Other organizational climate studies since Lewin focus on subsystems. The subsystems approach made the claim that an individual's perception influences the immediate environment surrounding the individual, and the organization, as members of the organization interact within subsystems (Awal & Stumpf, 1981; Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974). To further this idea of organizational climate as part of a subsystem, Powell & Butterfield (1978, p.155) suggested that subsystems within organizations are composed of individual members, in smaller groups that are formed, or as a whole group.

**Organizational climate and organizational culture.** Organizational climate and organizational culture are often mentioned in the same context. There is research that suggests that organizational climate is one component of organizational culture (Schein, 1992; Stringer, 2002); however, the two terms have also been shown to be different constructs (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Stringer, 2002). Since organizational climate and organizational culture are often interchanged, it makes separating the two concepts challenging, but important to distinguish, since a healthy organizational climate is linked to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of its members (Riggle, 2007) which may have an effect on teacher sensitivity and is embedded within the organizational culture of the school. The goal of schools is to create an organizational climate considered positive by its members which will result in positive child outcomes (Zinsser & Curby, 2014).

**Characteristics of Culture.** The unspoken set of attitudes and thinking in the culture can be referred to as organizational climate that is shaped by the leader's behavior (Schneider, 2000). Culture influences people's social conduct and interests, and interpersonal behaviors (Zhu, et al. 2011). "School culture refers to the way people think and feel about school" (Erickson, 1987, Zhu et al. 2011, p. 320). School culture is related to the productivity and

wellbeing of its members (Zhu, et al. 2011). The meanings held are historically transmitted through symbols interwoven within and expressed by symbolic forms (Geertz, 1993). According to Bodley (1994), Douglas (1992) and Geertz (1993), culture refers to a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs, and attitudes that shapes and influences perception and behavior. These forms can be explicitly expressed by symbols or implicitly expressed by taken-for-granted beliefs (Zhu et al. 2011). Jiang and Zhao (2000) described school organizational culture in terms of obvious and indirect facets which consisted of explicit (behavior, physical, communication, and implicit features of a school, (norms, values, assumptions, attitudes), and it is the hidden and buried culture that plays a major role in school organizational climate. A consensus has not been reached in the literature as to where culture/climate become separate constructs. Both terms tend to blend together and result in discussions over the same broad scope of phenomena, where each is influenced by the other.

**Characteristics of Climate.** There are characteristics of organizational climate that are embedded in early childhood best practices and principles. Climate is addressed in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards and practices. NAEYC (2009) identifies standards based on research that programs should adhere to: providing caring relationships, a well-rounded curriculum, employing teachers who are trained in early childhood development and education, providing continuing assessment of children, keeping children healthy and safe, working with families, engaging in quality community relationships, providing a physical environment that is supportive of child-guided experiences, and having a leadership and management team who promote a climate of learning and support. Healthy outcomes for children have been related to the climate within a school.

Organizational climate is a concept used by schools but is also often used by business and governments to identify ways in which organizations can have a more in-depth awareness of internal perceptions of performance and experiences identified by its members, (McKenzie, 2015). Policies at the center-level affect classroom practices, which can affect child outcomes (Zinsser et. al., 2016B). Interpersonal characteristics (Zinsser, Christensen, Torres, 2016, B) of the workplace, such as working conditions, emotional demands, co-worker relationships, access to resources and support (Reffett, 2009) have been attributed to workplace climate (Bloom, 1988; Karoly, Zellman, & Perlman, 2013; Zinsser et al. 2016, A). A preschool center's climate can affect the child's classroom experience (Zinsser and Curby, 2014). The term organizational climate is often interchanged with organizational culture and in examining the literature on both concepts, it appears that organizational climate is one component of organizational culture. This is explained further in the following section.

Organizational climate as it relates to a business, government, or school has been defined in many different ways while no standard definition of the concept of "climate" currently exists (McKenzie, 2015). Peterson and Spencer (1990) identified organizational climate as the current common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life and its members' perceptions of attitudes toward those dimensions (p.7). They postulate that three features arise out of this view: (a) an emphasis on common-participant views of organizational phenomena; (b) an emphasis on current patterns of beliefs and behaviors; and (c) its ability to be malleable. Schneider (2000) identified organizational climate as a set of psychological conditions in an organization that are created by the leader. Hoy and Tarter (1992) labeled organizational climate as the overall feeling within the organization of how supportive or unsupportive the environment is for the employees who work within its boundaries which is a general term, relating to the perception the individual



has of his/her work environment. Climate is related to the healthy development of a school, the well-being of its faculty and staff, and meeting its goals (Zhu et al. 2011).

Informal relations between each other, individual personalities, and leadership qualities influence organizational climate. A set of internal characteristics distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members (Hoy and Tarter 1992, p. 74). The collective perceptions of what the organization is like, in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes, perceived supportiveness, procedures, and routines describes organizational climate (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). These shared meanings are historically held and transmitted through symbols interwoven within and expressed by symbolic forms (Geertz, 1993). Organizational climate includes multifaceted qualities that discriminate one place of business from another, that endures over time and that helps control an employee's actions (Forehand and Von Gilmer, 1964). There are some connections nested between organizational climate and organizational culture.

**Sizes of Schools and Classrooms.** School size may be one organizational characteristic that influences children's outcomes. Smaller schools may create conditions that foster better relationships between teacher and child and result in better academic outcomes (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2007) particularly for underrepresented and minority children (Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002).

**Experiences.** In addition, classrooms vary widely in the type of experiences offered to children. End of the year reports relate to the variability of children's academic and social performances (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). The preschool center's climate directly influences the quality of instruction, teacher-child interactions, and influences the overall environment that contributes to a teacher's wellbeing, which ultimately influences child outcomes. Adult experiences of the environment, including how supportive it is, may be an

important factor in determining what happens for children (Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans, 2007).

**A Subcomponent of Culture.** There are dimensions of organizational climate that may be applied to a general business or the school itself. Organizational climate includes having an expectation of quality from within, positive leadership, participative decision-making, relationships at work, shared vision, having a priority of professional learning, how the teacher views his or her own commitment to the school, and other requirements such as regulations, compensation, and education. It is important to describe how teachers view their school's organizational climate in order to interpret personal and professional feelings and thoughts. A consensus has not been reached in the literature as to where culture/climate become separate constructs. Culture and climate blend and result in discussions over the same broad scope of phenomena. Table 2 displays the operational differences between the two terms.

**Administration.** The conditions of the work environment and responsive supervision affect a teacher's capacity to teach effectively (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). Leadership influences teachers' performance and attitudes about their work environment. Leadership behavior refers to the extent to which the teachers perceive the principal as someone who is able to organize school curriculum, events, and activities in a structured manner (Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010; Hoy & Tarter, 1997). The ability of the administration to effectively manage the work environment and be responsive in leadership roles within a school can relate to overall classroom quality (Allensworth, 2012; Muij, Aubrey, & Briggs, 2004).

Table 2. Definitions of Organizational Culture and Organizational Climate

Organizational Culture	
Person	Environment
“School culture refers to the way people think and feel about school” (Erickson, 1987, Zhu et al. 2011, p. 320)	Rooted in history, collectively held, and complex enough, hard to change or manipulate (Denison, 1996, p. 644)
Shared way of life for a particular group of people (Berry, Poortinga, Segal, & Dasen, 1992)	Implied values, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that are held within an organization (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Louis, 1985; Schein, 2004)
School culture is related to the productivity and well-being of its members (Zhu, et al. 2011)	Explicit (behavior, physical, communication, and implicit features of a school, (norms, values, assumptions, attitudes) (Jiang & Zhao, 2000)
	Collective perceptions in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes, perceived supportiveness, procedures, and routines (Jorde-Bloom, 2015)
Organizational Climate	
Person	Environment
Climate is a perception, not an assessment of job satisfaction, assessed on an individual level (Koys & DeCotiis, 1991)	Multi-faceted qualities, discriminate one place of business from another, that endures over long period of time, that helps to control an employee’s actions (Forehand & Von Gilmer, 1964)
Members manipulate climate can be manipulated by its members who have power or influence over employees (Denison, 1996)	Related to the healthy development of a school, the well-being of its faculty and staff, and meeting its goals (Zhu, et al. 2011)
Linked to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of its members (Riggle, 2007)	Autonomy, structure of the job, reward systems, overall consideration of warmth and support offered by the organization as a whole (Campbell & von Stauffenberg, 2007)

Principals have a role in influencing the goals, policies, practices, and social networks of a school (Bloom, 2015). Leadership by function relates to helping the organization clarify and live its values and helps to define and achieve goals (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). According to Jorde-Bloom (2015) hiring qualified teachers, setting overall expectations for teacher-child

interactions, and sharing the program's philosophy and vision are all crucial functions of the program administrator. The administration should be thought of as an organizational asset (Jorde-Bloom, 2015); however, less is known about how leadership as a component of organizational climate affects teacher's sensitivity.

Teachers gather a majority of support from leadership members, colleagues, parents, friends, and family. Leadership needs to come from within programs to assist teachers with how to implement effective interactions with children (Hamre et al. 2009, p. 45). Support through leadership is a component of organizational climate. Organizational climate is the staff's collective perceptions of what the organization is like in terms of policies, practices, procedures, and routines (Jorde-Bloom, 2015, p. 9). Leadership varies among early childhood programs. Administrators can have an influence on teachers' ideas of the workplace. There is research to suggest that elementary school principals have an impact on student learning through the school culture and climate, and schools that promote high quality standards are associated with positive academic outcomes (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Principals and early childhood program leaders influence school goals, practices, policies, and socialization (Jorde-Bloom, 2015) and children's development and learning are supported by a culture of high expectations, shared values, and common beliefs (Bloom, Hentschel, & Bella, 2013; Bloom, 2014). Leaders are a primary influence among several that assist teachers in creating a supportive environment.

**Compensation.** Teacher pay in early childhood education is a component of the overall identity of an organization. Although discussing wages and salaries as they relate to job performance are topics not openly discussed in the workplace, research suggests that there is a strong correlation between teacher pay and classroom quality (Phillips et al. 1992; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997; Scarr, Eisenberg, & Deater-Deckard, 1994). Teacher

sensitivity is an identified component of classroom quality (Bloom, 2015) and teachers' level of commitment to their work community was impacted by adequate compensation among other factors (Whitebook, et al. 2009). Zinsser and Curby (2014) identified childcare center characteristics that may be associated with teacher emotional support program's characteristics, management practices, and their personal experiences and satisfaction in the workplace. The CLASS™ was used to examine four dimensions within emotional support: positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. A significant amount of variance in center-level characteristics of emotional support, such as director's level of education, directors' salary, teacher turnover rate in the past year, steps to address turnover, directors' job satisfaction, management challenges, and supportive management practices. There was a 23% variance in teacher sensitivity CLASS™ scores attributed to these characteristics (Zinsser & Curby, 2014). There is evidence that the workplace climate affects teacher dispositions and classroom environments and that there is a relationship between directors' satisfaction at work and the emotional support teachers give to children (Zinsser & Curby, 2014). What is not known is if compensation affects the overall organizational climate of a school and if there are any correlations between compensation and teacher sensitivity.

**Regulations.** Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shimm (2000) describe the term *structural dimensions*, which include more easily quantified aspects of the early childhood environment that are variable to regulation and policy intervention. Structural dimensions, which can be easily measured, (Phillips, et al. 2000) include the child to teacher ratio, the staff qualifications, and fiscal components such as parent fees, staff salaries and benefits (Berk, 1985; Dunn, 1993; Hayes, Palmer, & Zalsow 1990; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988; (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2000; Phillips & Howes,

1987; Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1991). These associations are strongest for the structural dimensions (Phillips et al. 2000) that include sensitivity of adult-child interactions, which have also been found to contrast methodically with the strictness of state standards (Phillips, et al. 1992).

**Education.** Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans (2008) stated that higher qualified practitioners are reported to demonstrate significantly more positive and sensitive interactions than less qualified practitioners do. Teacher sensitivity has been identified to contribute to the overall quality of early childhood environments (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). A person's ability to process child behavior on a complex level, while trying to understand the sources of their behavior, rather than labeling the child's behavior as "good " or "bad" may be influenced by the level of education one attains, which Manlove et al. (2008) refers to as a "perspective thinker" (Manlove, et al. 2008). Arnett (1989) found that teachers who completed a four-year degree engaged in more positive interactions with children than those who had no training at all. These positive interaction descriptions, which have been defined as "teacher sensitivity", included expressing greater warmth for children and greater enthusiasm for the activity's children were engaged in, communicating more with children, and helping children learn to share and cooperate with other children (Arnett, 1989). In addition, the teachers with more education were less punitive, did not discipline children with hostility or threats, and used explanation and encouragement. "Teachers (in this study) were less detached from the children, exhibited less apathetic and uninterested behavior" (Arnett, 1989, p.549). de Kruif, McWilliam, Ridley, & Wakely (2000) concluded that the teachers' level of education and the licensing level of their child care center explained part of the differences in teacher interaction behaviors.

Improving the work setting may contribute to improving the sensitivity and responsiveness of caregiver interactions by helping teachers to behave in ways that support children's developmental needs and would be a more economical and expedient for a path to quality than increases to education and training. Current research has firmly established the importance of teacher sensitivity. However, we know little about how the work environment of teachers might affect their propensity to be sensitive to children. A positive workplace climate is important because the climate is essential to providing a high quality early childhood experience (Zinsser et al. 2016). There is ample evidence to show that the concept of organizational climate is an important concept to explore within teacher sensitivity and within this community.

**Components.** Attempts have been made to identify what constitutes the overall, general, main components of organizational climate. From the research, it is clear that three overall emerging themes have occurred as components of organizational climate in schools: perception, quality, and supportiveness.

**Perception.** The earliest identification of these dimensions included autonomy, structure of the job, reward systems, and the overall consideration of warmth and support offered by the organization as a whole. Climate is thought to be a perception and not an assessment of job satisfaction and should be assessed on an individual level (Koys & DeCotiis, 1991). Zinsser and Curby (2014) emphasize that perception is important because the workplace environment contributes to the overall effectiveness of the teacher. Organizational climate is the perception of what the organization is like in terms of policies, practices, procedures, and routines as the staff defines them (Bloom, 2015).

Teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and job satisfaction are also likely to be related to their work experiences (Zinsser et al. 2016, p. 270), concepts that could be explored using a non-

linear approach. When teachers perceived their work environments as less supportive, those rated as high on complexity of thinking (which is defined by looking at children's behavior as impacted by many factors) provided significantly more sensitive care to infants and toddlers than those rated low on complexity of thinking (Manlove, et al. 2008). It will be beneficial to explore teachers' perceptions of organizational climate and their perceptions of the influences on their teaching behaviors.

**Quality.** Three key aspects of the childcare work environment include quality of supervision provided, decision-making processes, and perceived supportiveness of individual professional development (Manlove et al. 2008). Using the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES, 2009) the findings suggest that organizational climate in early childhood programs affects the overall quality of the program (Zinsser & Curby, 2014). Such factors as enjoying work, belief that one is making a difference and commitment to early childhood education are the kind of dimensions that contribute to the climate of early childhood organizations.

**Supportiveness.** Perceived supportiveness is the idea that the school environment appears to embrace or that it is recognized by the staff to resemble the best practices for teaching children in a manner that supports the teacher as well as the developmental level of the child (Manlove et al. 2008). Organizational climate influences teaching practices (Bloom, 2015) however, it is difficult to know from the current literature if organizational climate influences teachers' sensitivity or sensitivity influences the organizational climate of the places where they work (Bloom, 2015; Bloom & Abel, 2015, Zinsser & Curby, 2014).

Centers that were perceived to offer support that is more professional appeared to have teachers who were more sensitive in their caregiving and applied developmentally appropriate



methods of teaching, regardless of their complexity of thinking status. Manlove et al. (2008) found that when a center reportedly provided few opportunities for professional development, the degree to which the teachers provided sensitive caregiving to children was dependent on whether or not the teacher was a complex thinker.

An emotionally supportive environment for pre-kindergarten children must include a teacher who can establish close emotional bonds with children. Creating an emotionally supportive environment is essential for children's optimum development and makes teacher sensitivity an important focus for educators. The sensitive interactions that a teacher displays with children in addition to teaching academic skills are essential to their successful participation in school and home life (Pianta, 2006).

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODS**

### **Areas of Inquiry**

Early childhood teachers are a critical component of an early childhood classroom. They exert an influence on the outcomes of preschoolers through their moment-to-moment interactions with them. Existing models and characteristics of sensitivity have been shown to relate to child outcomes, and many children are affected by the quality and type of early care they receive.

This project seeks to understand how a teacher describes his/her journey to becoming a sensitive teacher and to learn what teachers say helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) provides a framework for a conceptual model of how the developing person is interconnected with other members, events, and things that may affect their development and are situated within other aspects of his/her environment. Teacher sensitivity may be best understood from learning from the teachers themselves, a perspective that has not been explored much in the literature on this topic.

Systems interact and change over time, and the dynamics and nature of change shape the developing person according to ecological systems theory. Outside perspectives using traditional linear models have defined the degree to which a teacher is characterized with this quality. From this perspective, the characteristics of sensitivity include the degree to which a teacher responds to cues from children, which reflects their sincerity; the manner in which that response is given, which reflects the intensity of the response, or how well a teacher is able to add to what a child already knows; and the ability to recognize when a child needs assistance even before the child verbally or nonverbally gives a cue, which reflects the timing of a response.

There is a need to understand teacher sensitivity from within their environment, from their perspectives. Teachers' voices need to be heard so that childhood experiences in the

classroom can be designed with their perspectives in mind. An ecological approach to unpacking this concept is necessary to gain inside perspective into teacher sensitivity.

Teacher sensitivity, the sincerity, intensity, and timing of responses, are an integral part of a teacher's job and have an impact on their effectiveness, behavior, motivation, and cognition (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). There has been increased focus on the emotional climate of the preschool classroom as it relates to emotional adjustment and early learning (Goldstein, et al. 2001; Rimm-Kaufman, et al. 2005). In the present project, I engaged in thoughtful and purposeful research to observe teachers and become a part of their school environment in order to understand the concept of teacher sensitivity in more depth from their perspective.

Researchers found that teachers who engage in sensitive interactions promote both social and emotional development while developing academic and literacy skills, such as language and reading competence (Burchinal, et al. 2002; Howes, et al. 1994; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, et. al. 2002). Factors beyond the physical environment, which include teacher sensitivity, contribute to overall outcomes for children.

This qualitative single case study explores two major areas of inquiry to advance understanding of the development of teacher sensitivity in the early childhood school context:

- How does a teacher describe his/her journey to becoming a sensitive teacher?
- What do teachers say helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive?

## **Research Design**

Yin (2014) explains relevant situations in which case study research would be most appropriate for the chosen method for this project. Three conditions to use in determining which method is best considers the following: the type of research questions posed, the amount of control that the researcher has over the events, and whether the subject content is historical or

contemporary in nature. The main research question in this project is a “How?” question—how does a teacher describe his/her journey to becoming a sensitive teacher? This question fits best in a case study research model because this project attempts to understand how teacher sensitivity has occurred (Schramm, 1971); teacher sensitivity is a contemporary phenomenon, with blurred boundaries that exist between the case and its context. This case can be studied in depth within the real-world context in which it occurs (Yin, 2014). Teacher sensitivity has not been explored in this manner because it has not been defined as an essential component of the classroom. In addition, the case study method is the ideal method to use because the researcher can use a variety of evidence that is collected in real time; such evidence includes direct observation that occurs from witnessing events, interviews of relevant members, and collection of documents and artifacts. Collecting multiple sources of evidence is a basic feature of a case study, and this method was chosen to gain more insight into the phenomenon of teacher sensitivity. Multiple sources utilized to explore the concept of teacher sensitivity were used to make generalizations to the greater population which is a part of this case. It can provide multiple sources of evidence to explore a single concept, teacher sensitivity.

The case study method was used to organize the procedures of this study. This case was designed as a single case study, situated in a single elementary school. The case study design best fits the areas of inquiry because the phenomenon of teacher sensitivity examined within this setting is most unusual, as there are only limited schools of this type. Essentially, this is the only elementary public school focused exclusively on pre-kindergarten children within this state. This school, with over twenty-five classrooms composed entirely of pre-kindergarteners, staff members who work on behalf of prekindergarten children and teachers, and certified pre-kindergarten teachers is not a common occurrence and warrants additional investigation to

potentially reveal new insights and information. This case may be able to connect to a large number of people in the early childhood community beyond the classroom, for example, stakeholders, researchers, supervisors, school boards, and other state or federal policy makers. Because of its unique population and distinct location within the community, as well as being a hub for pre-kindergarten children throughout the parish, this single case is the best environment to gather information about teachers' experiences and uncovering what helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive.

**Participants.** This project encompassed the voices of twenty-one members of this case and focused specifically on the analysis of six teachers' voices. Teachers chose to participate by contacting the researcher after the researcher established rapport with several members of the school. Teacher voices included white female women between the ages of 35-65 years of age. Two teacher participants were recommended by another full-time teacher participant based on her relationship with the participants, their years of service in education, and their tenure at the school. Initially, retired full-time lead teachers were not considered as part of the initial proposed study of this case. This was mainly because the researcher did not realize their voices would be accessible during the course of the research project; nevertheless, their voices were essential in understanding the case in more detail. I felt compelled to include their perspectives because retired teachers can still give important information about the context of sensitivity. Participants contributed by a means of self-selection. Participants were randomly named by using common native flowers found in the state in which the study was completed.

Two other participants formally interviewed included an administrator, and a counselor, both female and African-American. Their perspectives were highlighted as their voices warrant contribution to the discussion. Four additional participants were informally interviewed, and

seven other district-affiliated members' perspectives were captured during participant observation, as well as the perspectives of two other non-members who were indirectly related to the school and who had intimate knowledge of the school. The participant interviews and the focus group included one teacher and two retired teachers, which made up approximately 4.5% of the current full-time teaching faculty. The teachers had a range of nine to forty-four years of teaching experience.

Participants were recruited through as the researcher-built relationships in the school during visits and snowball technique with current participants suggesting others. The researcher placed flyers and signs in teacher areas of the school at the beginning of the project, spoke at teacher meetings and district in-services about the project and invited teachers to be involved. In addition, the researcher walked around the school during climate walks and engaged in participant observation, establishing rapport with members at the school. There were over ten teachers who expressed interest and scheduled interviews; however, for reasons unknown, they chose not to participate. Ultimately, the six teachers who participated in this project attended the interview or focus group because they chose to participate on their own. The process of selection happened organically, without the researcher individually singling out specific teachers for this study. The primary participants, referenced as "teachers" going forward, included lead pre-kindergarten teachers who were responsible for one classroom of children. Investigating multiple perspectives from the original case allowed the researcher to minimize any chances of becoming refocused on other areas that strayed from the original phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2014), which in this case was teacher sensitivity. Speaking to other members and getting their perspectives highlighted and validated teachers' perspectives. Using the case study method in

this project was relevant since the case itself was an unusual occurrence in early childhood educational settings. Tables 3 and 4 highlight participant demographics and descriptions.

**Setting.** The selection of a case sample in qualitative research should represent how the case mirrors life (Neuman, 2000). Making observations of the real-life activities of these participants provided insight into teacher sensitivity and organizational climate (Neuman, 2000, p.245). The research setting for this case study was unique and made an ideal case to explore. The school is a larger public elementary school compared to others within the region, with a population of approximately 454 students.

Table 3. Positions Held by Members Who Were Included in this Case

School Administrator	School Counselor	School Resource Coordinator	School Dual-Language Coach	School Board Member
Superintendent	Early Childhood Supervisor	Physical Education Teacher	Full-Time Lead Pre-Kindergarten Teachers	Full-Time Para in Pre-Kindergarten Classroom
Parents	Office Staff	Janitors	Retired Full-Time Lead Pre-Kindergarten Teachers	Non-District Affiliated Members

Table 4. Years of Experience of the Teacher Participants

Teacher	Years of Experience
Teacher 1 Lead Teacher	26
Teacher 2 Lead Teacher	33
Teacher 3 Lead Teacher	23
Teacher 4 Para/Lead Teacher	09
Teacher 5 Lead Teacher Retired (<1 yr.)	36
Teacher 6 Lead Teacher Retired (< 2yrs.)	44

Using this particular school setting as opposed to collecting data from several elementary schools saved time for the researcher and allowed richer and more robust information to be discovered from teachers and other participants.

The school is unique because it is a flagship school in the community. Professionals in the early childhood field have defined this school as “an optimal early childhood environment” and “a little bit of heaven on earth.” Opened in 2003, it is populated entirely with four-year old children and is the only LA4 preschool in the state. The school currently houses 27 pre-kindergarten classes, servicing approximately 454 pre-kindergarten children within community. This school is also unique because the student body is comprised from all over the parish, so this school may be a true reflection of conditions that are relevant in all schools that have a pre-kindergarten population, which helps with the analytic generalizations that are made from case study research. In addition, the physical location of this school is centered in one of most socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the parish. Eighteen percent of people living in poverty in the Parish reside here ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). In the area where this school is located, the residents living in poverty is about (41%). The population of this school is composed of mostly racial and ethnic minority children, (roughly 80% majority Black children) which is higher than the state average of 55%. Most of the children (98%) qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. The average student: teacher ratio is 16:1, which is higher than the state average of 15:1. Approximately (100%) of the teaching staff is certified to teach, which is above the state average of (96%). There are students who have individual education plans (IEPs) for learning difficulties. Children with diverse and special needs are integrated within the mainstream classroom environment. The ways a teacher can identify his/her experience into becoming sensitive is important to understand because our most vulnerable population of children depends on a teacher to provide a learning environment that is going to assist them in overcoming all of the odds stacked against them and their future development, both socially and academically.



The researcher has visited this school on at least ten separate occasions in the role of a contract CLASS™ observer over the course of five years. As part of the participant observation process, the opportunity presented itself during data collection that I was able to enroll my pre-kindergarten child at this school during the research project, giving me deeper and richer insight into the case as a participant observer. It was the experiences that the children were having in the classroom that appeared unique during these visits. Something was especially significant about the way teachers treated children and the level of comfort the children had in the classroom environment. These experiences have influenced the interest in the phenomenon of teacher sensitivity and how the work environment is perceived from within the school. In addition, the school that is the subject of this case is of interest in order to investigate in-depth the concept of organizational climate. Leadership needs to come from within programs to assist teachers with how to implement effective interactions with children (Hamre, et al. 2009, p. 45). Principals and early childhood program leaders influence school goals, practices, policies, and socialization (Jorde-Bloom, 2015).

**Organizational Climate Survey Results.** The school's climate was measured using the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire Rutgers Elementary (OCDQ-RE) (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). The climate of the school is a description of the setting and reflects the overall behavioral dimensions of the teacher and principal (Pretorius & de Villiers, 2009). The climate reflects the individual perceptions of his/her work environment. In this case, the overall description of this school was an "Engaged Climate".

The OCDQ-RE questionnaires were handed out during the interview and focus group sessions. At each interview and the focus group, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, emphasized the participation was strictly voluntary, and ensured participant anonymity.

Prior to leaving each interview and the focus group, the researcher also put stamped envelopes with the researcher's return address attached to each blank questionnaire. All participants took a copy of the questionnaire and stamped envelope with them when our meeting was over. Of the five surveys that were distributed, four were collected for a return rate of 67%. The distribution of survey participation is provided in Table 5.

Table 5. OCDQ-RE Survey Collection Details

Teachers	Grade Level	Surveys	Distributed	Surveys Collected
6	Pre-K	6	4	67%

*Note.* The researcher utilized the formulas provided by Hoy et al. (1991) to score the OCDQ-RE.

The following guidelines were used (Hoy et al. 1991) to score the OCDQ-RE:

1. Every participant's survey was scored with the number value on the Likert scale that corresponded with their agreement (1, 2, 3, 4). Scores for items 6, 31, and 37 were inverted because the items were stated negatively.
2. The average school score was calculated for each item by adding the scores for each item for each participant, then dividing by the total number of respondents.
3. The average scores were added based on the instructions for this survey. There are six component scores that represent the climate profile of the school.

Once the school subset scores were calculated, these scores were converted to standardized scores (SdS) with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. According to Hoy (1990), standardization of the scores allows the researcher to make direct comparisons among schools. Using large and diverse sampling of elementary schools in New Jersey, Hoy created the index and related formulas (Hoy, 1990). Considering previous research on school climate from a variety of states that used the OCDQ-RE for their studies (McIntyre 2004; Lowe, Belsky, Burchinal, & Steinberg, 2010), the researcher assumed that the normative sample was

appropriate for the school division in this study. The formulas for determining the standardized scores for the OCDQ-RE are included in the published version of this tool

Once the SdS scores were established, they were used to calculate principal openness and teacher openness. The two openness measures were computed using the following formulas:

Principal Openness = (SdS for S) + (1000 - SdS for D) + (1000 - SdS for R) / 3

Teacher Openness = (SdS for C) + (SdS for Int) + (1000 - SdS for Dis) / 3

The principal openness and teacher openness scores were used to calculate the overall school climate scores for this school. The overall school climate scores were computed using the calculations found in the published OCDQ-RE.

Once data were compiled it was transferred to an Excel Document to calculate mean scores for each of the six dimensions of school climate and the subsequent level of openness and overall school climate.

**Supportive Principal Behavior.** This type of behavior is characterized by a basic concern for teachers (Hoy, 1991). The principal listens and is open to teacher suggestions. The principal gives praise on a regular basis, and criticism is handled constructively. The faculty is viewed as competent and respected, and the principal exhibits both a personal and professional interest in the teachers. Table 9 shows the mean scores for questions from the OCDQ-RE that are associated with supportive principal behavior at the school. The mean is based on responses to scale that ranges from 1 (rarely occurs), 2 (sometimes occurs), 3 (often occurs), to 4 (very frequently occurs). Mean Scores for each principal and teacher questions are presented in Tables 6 – 12, below. Each table has the item associated with each dimension and the relative mean responses.

Table 6. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Supportive Principal Behavior

Items	Supportive Principal	Mean
04	The principal goes out of his/her way to help teachers	2.75
09	The principal uses constructive criticism	2.50
15	The principal explains reasons for criticism	2.25
16	The principal listens to and accepts suggestions.	2.50
22	The principal looks out for personal welfare	2.50
23	The principal treats teachers as equals.	2.50
28	The principal compliments teachers.	2.75
29	The principal is easy to understand.	2.50
42	The principal goes out of way to show appreciation	2.50

Table 7. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Directive Principal Behavior

Items	Directive Principal	Mean
05	The principal rules with an iron fist.	2.25
10	The principal checks the sign-in sheet every morning.	2.00
17	The principal schedules the work for the teachers.	2.50
24	The principal corrects the teachers' mistakes.	2.50
30	The principal closely checks classroom activities.	2.50
34	The principal supervises teachers closely.	3.00
35	The principal checks lesson plans.	3.00
39	The principal is autocratic.	1.50
41	The principal monitors everything teachers do.	3.00

Table 8. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Restrictive Principal Behavior

Items	Restrictive Principal	Mean
11	Routines interfere teaching.	1.75
18	Teachers have too many committee requirements.	3.00
25	Administrative paperwork is burdensome at this school.	2.50
31	Clerical support reduces teachers' paperwork.	3.25
36	Teachers are burdened with busy work.	2.75

Table 9. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Collegial Teacher Behavior

Items	Collegial Teacher	Mean
06	Teachers leave school immediately after school is over.	2.50
12	Most of the teachers here accept the faults of their colleagues.	3.00
19	Teachers help and support each other.	3.00
26	Teachers are proud of their school.	3.25
32	New teachers are readily accepted by colleagues.	3.25
37	Teachers socialize together in small, select groups.	2.25
40	Teachers respect the professional competence of their colleagues.	3.00

Table 10. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Intimate Teacher Behavior

Items	Intimate Teacher	Mean
02	Teachers' closest friends are other faculty members.	3.00
07	Teachers invite faculty members to visit them at home.	2.50
13	Teachers know the family background of faculty.	2.25
20	Teachers have fun socializing together during school.	1.75
27	Teachers have parties for each other.	2.25
33	Teachers socialize with each other on a regular basis.	2.00
38	Teachers provide strong social support for colleagues.	2.75

Table 11. Mean Scores for Questions Associated with Disengaged Teacher Behavior

Item	Disengaged Teacher	Mean
03	Faculty meetings are useless.	1.75
08	There is a minority group of teachers who always oppose the majority.	1.00
14	Teachers exert group pressure on non-conforming faculty members.	1.25
21	Teachers ramble when they talk at faculty meetings.	1.25

Table 12. Mean Standardized Scores for this School

Category	Score	SdS	Ranking
Supportive behavior (S)	22.50	482.68	Slightly below average
Directive behavior (D)	22.25	590.94	High
Restrictive behavior (R)	13.25	517.42	Slightly above average
Collegial behavior (C)	23.00	495.91	Average
Intimate behavior (Int)	16.50	465.89	Below average
Disengaged behavior (Dis)	5.75	402.38	Low

Once these scores were calculated for each dimension, the scores were converted to SdS with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100, using the formulas referenced earlier. As shown in Table 13, the mean standardized scores for this school were as follows: Supportive behavior (482.68); Directive behavior (590.94); Restrictive behavior (517.42); Collegial behavior (495.91); Intimate behavior (465.89); Intimate behavior (465.89); and Disengaged behavior (402.38).

**Open Principal Behavior.** Hoy et al. (1991) indicated that genuine relations with teachers characterize this type of behavior. The principal establishes a supportive, encouraging environment free from routine busy work. Teachers are able to concentrate on teaching. The principal is approachable, open to ideas of teachers and is genuinely concerned with both their social and professional needs. In contrast, closed principal behavior is rigid, close, and unsupportive. Principal Openness is determined by using the following formula:  $(\text{SdS for S}) + (1000 - \text{SdS for D}) + (1000 - \text{SdS for R}) / 3$ . The mean score for principal openness at this school was 458.11, which would be considered slightly below average.

**Open Teacher Behavior.** Hoy and Tarter. (1991) characterized this type of behavior as having genuine interactions between staff members, wherein teachers are sincere, positive, and friendly in their interactions with colleagues. Teacher Openness is determined using the following formula:  $\text{Teacher Openness} = (\text{SdS for C}) + (\text{SdS for Int}) + (1000 - \text{SdS for Dis}) / 3$ . The mean score for this school for Teacher Openness was 519.81, slightly above average. According to Pertorius & De Villiers (2009) in their discussion of an engaged climate, this climate reflects teachers who are highly professional, support each other, proud of their colleagues, and enjoy their work. They are more likely to respect each other's competence, and they like each other as people.

**Overall School Climate.** In looking at the scores for principal openness and teacher openness and compared to the climate classification for overall school climate discussed previously, it could be said that this school has an Engaged Climate, where the Teacher Openness is  $> 500$  and the Principal Openness is  $< 500$ .

The characteristic of an open climate are cooperation, respect and openness; all attributes that exist within the school environment, among the faculty, and between the faculty and principal (Hoy et al. 1991). Additionally, the principal within an open school listens and is receptive to feedback and provides frequent, genuine praise.

**Materials.** Data collection for this qualitative case study followed a carefully planned timeline (Table 13) and utilized multiple sources. From these sources, a case study database was created (Table 14). The approach used to collect data was considered from a naturalistic view, one that considers the field to be something that we construct throughout different phases of field study and it is impossible to separate the researcher from the research (Mulhall, 2003).

### **Measures.**

**Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews that followed an interview protocol were conducted. The protocol consists of 6 prepared interview questions, along with clarifying or probing questions interspersed by the interviewer (see the interview protocol in Appendix A). Sample questions included “Tell me about what teacher sensitivity means to you?” and “How does teacher sensitivity exist in your classroom?” Follow-up questions were designed to clarify information given based on the unique responses of the participants. Face-to-face unstructured interviews or open-ended interviews (Yin, 2009) were conducted in an informal manner to gather the views and opinions of members of the school. This strategy is well suited to study participants within this framework as the concepts of organizational climate and teacher

Table 13. Data Collection Timeline

Week 01	Week 02	Week 03
Climate Walk #1 Introductions Observations Identify operations, logistics Collect documents, artifacts Record, transcribe data Data analysis	Climate Walk #2 Evaluate personal mindsets Identify stakeholders, gatekeepers Participate in events Make connections b/w groups Collect documents/artifacts Record, transcribe data Analysis of data	Climate Walk #3 Ask for interview participants Participate in events Collect documents/artifacts Record, transcribe data Analysis of data Request outside reader comments
Week 04	Week 05	Week 06
Climate Walk #4 Interviews Observations Invitations - formal observations Invite member checking Collect documents/artifacts Record, transcribe data Analysis of data	Climate Walk #5 Informal observations Conduct interviews Ask for participation in focus groups and schedule focus group clusters (2–3) Participate in events Invite member checking Collect documents/artifacts Record, transcribe data Analysis of data, refine codes	Climate Walk #6 Informal observations, focus groups, follow-up interviews Distribute OCDQ–RE Ask for additional interviews Collect documents/artifacts Participate in events Invite member checking Record, transcribe data Analysis of data, define themes
Week 07	Week 08	Week 09
Climate Walk-Final Final Data Collection Informal observations; focus group Participate in events Collect documents/artifacts Invite member checking Thank participants Complete transcriptions Analysis of data, refine codes	Synthesize information Data Triangulation Organize database Invite member checking Continue Thematic analysis	Clean and finalize data analysis, Organize themes Prepare outline of results Request outside reader comments Introduce possible discussion topics



Table 14. Case Study Database

Data	Source		Collection Method	
Documents	Children's files	Newspaper	Records of email	Announcements
	Websites	archives	correspondence	Progress reports
	Pamphlets	Flyers	Memoranda	Personnel files
	Bulletin boards	Brochures	Letters to parents	Newspaper
	Social media	Parent boards	Letters from school board	articles
	websites	Public use files	Letters from school	Internet searches
	School organizational records	Maps/charts of school	administration	
	Survey data		Agendas	
Interviews	Teachers	Administrators	Interview protocol	
	Support staff	Custodians		
	Mental health workers	Cafeteria Workers		
	Contractors	Parents		
	Volunteers	Parents		
	Local community members	District supervisors		
Direct Observation	Formal or casual meetings	Classrooms	Detailed field notes	
	Extra activities	General facility walkthrough	Climate walks	
			Photographs	
Participant Observations	Classroom volunteer		Collected during times before/after formal and informal observations	Assisting with a school play
	Parent volunteer		Interviews	Parent drop off and pick up
	Office assistant		Book fair	Recess
			End of school year event	Office
			Participating in outside-the-classroom activities	Physical education
			Library	Lunch
Physical Artifacts	Researcher		Letters	
	Teachers		Email correspondence	
	Administration		Documents	
	Support staff		Calendars	
	Parents		Flyers	
			Internal records	
			Progress reports	
			Newspaper clippings	
			Mass media, social media postings	
			Parent correspondence	

sensitivity are best explored as a process of development rather than separate ideas that can be quantified. School climate is a multifaceted concept and the situations that are created within the school and what influence it has on its' members is of real interest (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Kelly, 1980; Stringer, 2002). By using quotes in the participants' own voices, the researcher was able to explore teachers' perceptions of organizational climate and teacher sensitivity.

The interviews were voice recorded using "Clear Record" App for iPhone. The questions were designed to elicit information and experiences about the topic of teacher sensitivity. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 60 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted on site at the school in the main office, physical education building, in the resource office, and in a classroom. In addition, one interview was conducted at an agreed upon meeting place outside of campus at a national chain coffee shop.

**Focus groups.** Using data collected from informal encounters with lead pre-kindergarten teachers, the researcher conducted a focus group with three participants. Focus groups can be considered interviews on a specific topic with a small group of individuals (Patton, 2002). Focus groups allow the participants to hear each other's responses to prepared questions and craft their own responses as they process what others have to say on the topic. This format allowed the researcher to obtain high-quality data in a social context (Patton, 2002) and to gain a deeper understanding of the groups' views on teacher sensitivity. This format allowed teachers to reflect on how organizational climate plays or does not play a part in teacher sensitivity. Semi-structured questions will guide the line of inquiry and all initial and subsequent questions. To obtain this depth, the researcher will ask additional follow-up questions in order to clarify

information. The protocol also directs the case study topic using the responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The focus group protocol included six questions along with clarifying or probing questions added by the interviewer. The questions were designed to elicit information and experiences about the topic of organizational climate, such as “What is it like to be a teacher at this school?” and “Describe how you feel supported at school.” Refer to Appendix B for a complete focus group protocol. The time frame was initially proposed to be limited to 30-45 minutes; however, the participants provided a large amount of data during our session and the focus group conducted lasted approximately 80 minutes. As with interviews, responses, and follow-up questions were recorded using “Clear Record” App for iPhone to obtain verbatim transcript of the dialogue for later analysis. The focus group was conducted at a national bookstore meeting area.

**Direct Observations (Climate Walks).** The school climate walkthrough tool was created by adapting two available tools: the School Climate Walkthrough Form developed by Baltimore City Public Schools, available publicly online at [www.baltimorecityschools.org](http://www.baltimorecityschools.org), and the indicators from the ECERS-R (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005). Climate walks were implemented to document aspects of the school from an outsider’s perspective, which include the school entrance, the physical environment, general student/staff interaction, transitions, classrooms, and other unique features of the particular setting from the perspective of the observer. One climate walk was completed once per week for nine weeks. Using the created tool, each climate walk lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

In addition, handwritten notes included information about the setting, the people, and the activities that were taking place in the researcher’s own words in real-time; direct quotations

when applicable and personal comments about the observations (Merriam, 2001). Events were documented before and after using the “Clear Record” App for iPhone then later transcribed verbatim. These events included parent meetings, carpool, teacher in-service meetings, school-wide events, field trips, district meetings, teacher planning time, and chance encounters on campus and informal interactions on campus that spontaneously occurred during the climate walk or by visiting the school. The researcher did not ask the teachers to observe their classrooms; but waited to be invited to classrooms and events that occurred during the research period. Research observations were only conducted in classrooms to which the researcher was formally invited by the teacher. The researcher was able to directly observe three physical education classes, a music class, several after-school activities held in the library, and three classrooms. Most of the teachers who participated in the interview did not invite the researcher into their classrooms. The researcher spent approximately 30 minutes to one hour observing at the site once per week for nine weeks in addition to the time spent conducting the climate walk for two weeks in May 2018 then from August 2018 to December 2018.

**Direct Observations (Participant Observations).** Participant observations allowed me to view the school in a natural setting. I was successful in observing multiple types of functions as a participant. I was able to participate in the school-wide fun day, the end-of-the-school-year program, new school year teacher in-services, child-assessment day before the new school year began, parent orientation, parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, parent drop-off, parent pick-up, lunch-time, and I was able to observe the general comings and goings of the members in their daily routines on multiple occasions over a period of six months.

**Documents and Artifacts.** In this study, it was vital that the participants’ voices be heard as they discussed teacher sensitivity. Documents that were gathered did not lead to new themes,

however, they complemented and confirmed information gathered from participant interviews. I collected and reviewed approximately sixty documents and ten artifacts over a 24-week period from direct and participation observations, and from the teachers that were interviewed. Documents and artifacts were analyzed for content and themes. These included meeting notes/minutes, agendas, parent flyers, reminders, and teacher, school, and child information. They were gathered in real-time over the course of the project and were not gathered from archival records. Participants would refer to documents, but rarely provided them. Some of the documents were fragmented, selective, and were not able to be completely coded. There were topics that participants discussed that were not collected. Examples of the documents selected, and data analyzed are in Appendix E, Tables 1 & 4.

Documentary data was analyzed together with data from interviews and observations so that themes would emerge across all sets of data. The documents provided some context of teacher sensitivity, reaffirming what teachers revealed during interviews about what helped or hindered their ability to respond sensitively to children and further grounded the data in teacher sensitivity. The documents provided rich contextual background support for what teachers had to say in interviews and what I observed from direct and participant observations. The documents served to assist in asking probing questions and the researcher used documents make decisions about what events or situations to attend, observe, or participate going forward.

### **Organizational Climate Description for Elementary Schools Survey (OCDQ-RE).**

This OCDQ-RE survey was designed to assess teacher perceptions of school climate by focusing on two dimensions, teacher behavior and principal behavior, with six dimensions: Supportive principal behavior, Directive principal behavior, Restrictive principal behavior, Collegial teacher behavior, Intimate teacher behavior, and Disengaged teacher behavior, using 42 questions with a

Likert Scale ranging from 1 (rarely occurs), 2 (sometimes occurs), 3 (often occurs) and 4 (very frequently occurs). Items are answered from the teacher's point of view (Hoy et al. 1991).

Measurements of reliability and construct validity have been established. The survey was given to six participants.

**Reliability.** Each of these dimensions were measured by a subtest of the OCDQ-RE. The reliability scores for the scales were relatively high; (Supportive (.84), Directive (.86), Restrictive (.81), Collegial (.87), Intimate (.83), and Disengaged (.78) (Hoy, et al. 1991). Construct validity. The validity of each dimension of openness was supported by correlating each dimension with the original OCDQ index of openness (Hoy, 1972). In the sample for the instrument, the index of teacher openness correlated positively with the original general school openness index ( $r=.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as did the index of principal openness ( $r=.52$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The factor analysis of the scale study supports the construct validity of organizational climate (Hoy, et al. 1991).

**Procedures.** Participants were recruited in May of 2018 until December 2018. Members of the school were initially contacted using a flyer that was hand delivered in May of 2018. From there, the researcher would follow-up with leads as they developed using electronic mail and SMS messaging based on verbally expressed interest in the study and availability of the potential participants. There were twenty-seven full-time teaching faculty that were a part of a larger staff of over eighty members.

The researcher spoke with a mix of school faculty and staff members during a 24-week period (May 2018 and January 2019). Conversations included those affiliated with the school who were able to provide multiple perspectives (Neuman, 2000). Having multiple perceptions

allows the researcher to gain insight into more voices to potentially make broader generalizations and to ensure a study that is robust, rich, and genuine (Yin, 2014).

Permission to begin research with the participants was granted in late April 2018 from the school and district office. Data collection was going to take place over a period of 9 weeks. Because the researcher did not begin collecting evidence, data, and interviews till the mid to late month of May 2018, the data collection process was halted due to the school closing for summer break. The researcher was able to obtain one participant interview over the summer. The remainder of participant interviews took place between the beginning of the new school year, August 2018 and ended in December 2018 before the school closed for winter break. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, and two follow-up interviews were done over electronic correspondence.

Focus groups were more challenging to complete. The first focus group attempt, which was to happen over the Winter break, resulted in zero attendees, although there was verbal confirmation that they would attend or send another teacher in their place. Written reminders were also sent to their classrooms prior to the meeting. After the teachers returned from Winter break, the researcher began to plan the next focus group attempt. The researcher contacted one of the teachers by telephone, who had previously interviewed for the project, and asked for her help in composing a group of teachers for a focus group. This longer period of time that was taken to collect the data gave the data gathering phase some logical and specific boundaries. The researcher was able to directly observe teachers and the school setting at the end of the school year and at the beginning and middle of the following school year. This allowed the researcher to have a complete picture of the school year.

**Procedures for Direct Observations.** Each bi-weekly or weekly visit to the school followed this protocol and lasted approximately one hour. Appendix D includes the timeframe used to guide the researcher's data collection and tasks for direct observations. Member checking began immediately after the initial transcriptions were prepared. Data analysis happened simultaneously during collection but became much more focused once all data had been transcribed in accordance with standard research practices of qualitative analysis (Merriam, 1988, p. 155). Throughout data collection, the researcher invited members to view research notes and documents collected. In addition, an outside reader was chosen to review notes and make objective observations on the data collection process. The outside reader did not have specific knowledge of the methods used and viewed the project through a fresh lens. The following weekly timeline (Table 13) was adhered to as a way to keep data collection organized and consistent. An organized timetable (Table 13) was essential to allow the project to be completed in a given timeframe and for the researcher to stay on task. The project began in the (Fall Semester) and consisted of 24 weeks of data collection which resulted in on-going analysis, followed by another 16 weeks (Spring Semester) to synthesize all data. The duration of the project was approximately one year. Transcription of interviews occurred within each week data was collected to keep the information organized in a timely manner.

### **Analysis**

As shown in Figure 1, information for this project was obtained in three phases, known as data triangulation. The sources above came together to produce valuable information that corroborated evidence as to the topic being studied and supported conclusions made.



According to Stake (1995), evidence is an attribute of information and contributes to understanding and confidence into attaining deeper conviction of how something works. Triangulating different sources of data, the focus groups and personal interviews, the researcher's observations, and the collection of documents and artifacts assisted in building a justification for themes which added to the interpretation of the study (Patton, 2002). Being able to use these different methods of collecting data and documenting the process of data collection added a multi-dimensional layer to this process. The resulting information was created by a triangulation or convergence of sources (Creswell, 2013).

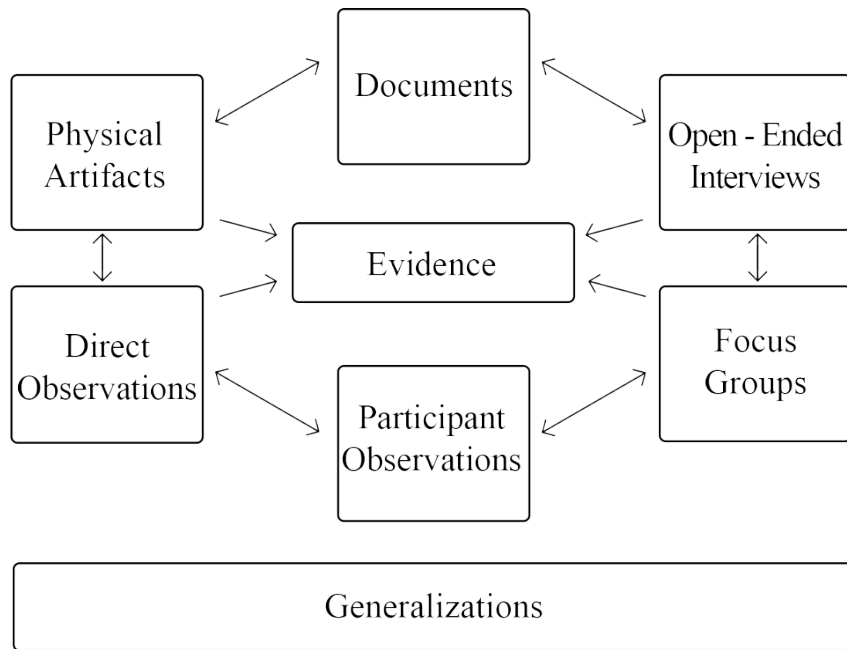


Figure 1. Data Triangulation/Convergence of Evidence, Single Study (Yin, 2009)

I used observations to formulate hypotheses based on the data through a process of analytic induction (Glaser, 1978). This process is in the opposite direction of a deductive approach usually required for quantitative studies. Since the data collected in this project was obtained through a case study approach, the observations were used to refine, reject, and reformulate my hypotheses throughout the process as I attempted to develop a theory from the

data. Asking questions, conducting observations, and keeping an open mind allowed the themes to develop and emerge from the “ground up.” My goal in piloting this study was to provide more empirical knowledge of how teacher sensitivity is conceptualized and identified from many different viewpoints inside the organization, thus getting information that can account for all relationships and influences among and between those relationships and getting the teachers’ voices to be illuminated on this topic.

Data analysis occurred in a series of five steps. The first step in the data analysis was to record field notes regarding each encounter/experience. The conceptual framework stated that previous research on this concept captured teacher sensitivity as a skillset that is composed of reaction response qualities such as sincerity, intensity, and the timing of the response as a teacher reacts to children’s cues in the moment-to-moment interactions that occur with them. After reviewing studies and their exploration of teacher sensitivity, the first step of data analysis was to collect the data. I conducted interviews to assess teachers’ experiences regarding teacher sensitivity, engaged in participant and direct observation, conducted a focus group, completed a climate walk, a short survey was distributed, and documents and artifacts were collected. Creswell (2007) stated, “When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities” (p.16). Table 15 refers to the various collection methods and sources used.

The second step in the data analyses was to have each interview transcribed from digital recordings to a word-for-word print document. The transcribed data collected was coded for commonalities and recurring words/phrases/statements. Data for this qualitative case study were analyzed manually through categorical aggregation (Creswell, 1998) beginning in Fall 2018 and ending in the Spring 2019, over a 24-week period. Interviews, focus group, researcher notes, and

document/artifact cataloging were transcribed by hand. All digitally recorded notes were transcribed by hand without the use of transcription software. The researcher is confident that the topics and themes that emerged from this data accurately reflect the unique perspectives of the participants. Written researcher notes were also reviewed to search for commonalities among experiences. A database was created that included all of the information obtained from each method of data collection.

The third step involved clustering the codes into themes. The process of combining quotes from all participants resulted in a reference document. The codes were then analyzed for general statements, which resulted in the identification of significant themes. According to Bogden and Biklen (1998), the researcher is able to discover topics and patterns through the application of coding categories to study the data. The individual codes were written on sticky Post-It Notes and attached to a large white board. Then these categories were color-coded in an outline on a Google Document.

The fourth step was to provide thick description of the experiences of teachers using their voices, as understood by the researcher, namely, how a teacher describes his/her journey to becoming sensitive and what teachers say helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive. Data collected were deconstructed using data triangulation. This process brought evidence together using multiple sources. The various methods of data collection assisted in the addition of a multi-dimensional layer to the process of building and justifying themes. The process of triangulating different sources of data, the focus group, personal interviews, the researcher's notes, and the collection of documents and artifacts helped to justify the themes, which resulted from this project. Interview data was dissected into smaller pieces so it could be later recon-textualized into "a larger, consolidated picture" (Tesch, 1990, p.97).

The fifth step in the data analysis process was to ensure within reason, the reliability of data analysis and research conclusions. Final analysis did not occur until the members had checked the data, enabling the researcher to feel confident that the data accurately reflect the views, opinions, and feelings of each participant. The researcher is confident that the topics and themes developed from the study accurately depict the research phenomenon from the uniquely different perspectives of the participants.

**Researcher Notes.** Before and after each visit to the school, I would take a moment to record my thoughts about the experience using an app called Clear Record. I would then transcribe researcher to classify statements into topics and themes that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2013).

**Timeline.** The original project timeline was expected to be a nine-week-long endeavor. I initially planned to build rapport throughout the project; however, I wanted to establish a relationship with the participants by week 07. However, due to the relatively close relationship of the participants, it was difficult to build rapport in a seven-week period. This group viewed me as an outsider, and they were reluctant to discuss information with me. A few teachers whom I thought would interview with me through initial conversations with them did not end up showing up for the scheduled interviews or did not return my requests for follow-up after initially establishing contact. Each time I would visit the school, I would revisit teachers and try to establish new connections. The amount of rapport building with potential participants and the time constraints of the researcher turned the project into a 24-week long endeavor. Without being able to immerse oneself in the school completely, the nine weeks was not a realistic deadline given the nature of the close relationships that had to be formed between the researcher and the participants before participants would feel comfortable agreeing to participate in this project.

Participants relied on other participants to offer approval of the project before they would agree to interview with me. Interviews and focus groups occurred between May of 2018 and January of 2019. Interviews were conducted beginning in May of 2018, in the Summer of 2018, then in the Fall of 2018. A focus group was scheduled for December of 2018, however, there was no attendance, so another focus group scheduled and was held in January of 2019. This focus group resulted in attendance of three members, one current member and two recently (less than 2 years) retired members of the teaching faculty. The data collection ended once the focus group was complete. All participants were given a copy of the interview transcriptions for verification and editing through member checking. In addition, all participants were encouraged to make additions, deletions and alteration to ensure that the final transcription accurately depicted their views, opinion, and experiences. Through the process of member checking, no substantial changes were made to the original transcripts.

Information from the interview transcripts, researcher notes, and the focus group were categorized and coded according to common, overlapping comments, and analyzed for word and phrase repetitions and overarching statements. Documents and artifacts were categorized. A 42-question survey, the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire-Revised, (OCDQ-RE) was also distributed to the teachers who were interviewed. Four were completed and returned my U.S. mail.

**Philosophical Paradigm.** Kuhn (1977) defined a paradigm as “The entire global set of commitments shared by members of a particular scientific community.” A paradigm is how one approaches theory and research, a way of thinking in the scientific community. In general, a scientific paradigm is “A whole system of thinking and includes basic assumptions, the

important questions to be answered, the techniques to be used, and the examples of what good scientific research looks like” (Neuman, 2000, p.65).

In examining three major paradigms used in scientific research methodology for this project, the research method chosen originates from the perspective of the interpretive social science paradigm. From this exemplar, the researcher conducts a “reading” to discover meanings from parts related to a whole. The researcher will utilize interpretive research from participants to obtain direct observations in natural settings to understand how people interpret or understand their world. From the work of Max Weber, interpretive social science is best viewed from the lived experience where the researcher learns the personal reasons and motives that influence behavior (1981).

Blaikie (1993) explains interpretive social science research as originating from hermeneutics, a theory based on meanings and the idea to illuminate what is ambiguous within human behavior and attempt to understand the thought processes of individuals or groups. This process hopes to underscore what meanings are given among members as it relates to the concept of organizational climate and how this perception among its members has any involvement with the development of teacher sensitivity. The hope is that through this process, the journey to becoming a sensitive teacher is highlighted, what it means to be sensitive is described in the teachers’ voices, and perceptions of organizational climate will be explored from the teachers’ lens.

**Philosophical Assumptions.** This interpretative approach using participant observation and field research is based on certain philosophical assumptions. In a pragmatic paradigm, there are three basic postulations. The first assumption to collecting data from an ontological stance (Creswell, 2013), or the “nature of reality,” involves the notion that reality encompasses what is

valuable and workable. The second assumption takes an epistemological stance (Creswell, 2013), or “how reality is known.” From this perspective, the assumption involves making sense of reality by using multiple approaches. The last assumption is one of value, or axiology. The axiological assumption (Creswell, 2013) considers the conversations between members and the researcher about principles and standards.

**Biases.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, and brings a certain amount of bias into the data collection and interpretation. This project can be identified as being highly personal (Stake, 1999). The emotional involvement in the research provides a significant connection between the life of the researcher and the rigorous requirement of the social scientific endeavor (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996, p.286). This project is very personal to me because as a parent, I have nurtured my four children with the knowledge of child development and systems theory. I believe in quality early childhood experiences and the need for children to have access to those experiences. I believe that using these principles and believing in this philosophy have positively impacted my children and made me a better parent and person, and in a small way, have impacted future generations in my family and in my community. The main qualification of the researcher is experience, and it is therefore important to include personal experiences in the interpretation. We must use the experience to know what leads to a significant understanding, know good sources of data, and be able to test our interpretations (p.50). I have dedicated my professional life to this field for twenty years and made a career choice to work on behalf of children by coaching, mentoring, and educating people who have daily impact on their lives. I have lived these principles in my daily interactions with teachers and children, including my own children and the teachers that I have mentored and coached, trained, and taught. I have

an interest personally and professionally to reach a deeper understanding of teacher sensitivity as it relates to the early childhood community.

My role as the instrument will be shaped by my previous experience working as an early childhood education teacher, an instructional coach, and a classroom observer of teacher behavior and teacher-child interactions. For over ten years, I have been coaching and teaching pre-service teachers and teachers currently employed in early childhood. I am currently working as an instructor of undergraduate studies in child and family studies in a university setting. In addition, I am the director of a small early childhood lab school where we coach and mentor students on how to effectively and appropriately guide children's learning and development in the physical, cognitive, and social domains. I have conducted over 150 observations of teachers in the last eight years, using early childhood assessments and rating scales. These experiences have given me unique insight, understanding, and knowledge of sensitive teaching and the influences of organizational climate and culture on teaching. I also know that I will have certain biases, although every effort will be made to be a neutral observer and report and analyze data in an objective, unbiased manner. I will remember to place professional distance between my role as an investigator and that of a participant immersed in the environment that I am to study.

I am somewhat familiar with the early childhood teaching environment and its members, in an indirect way from a somewhat outside perspective. I have worked as a community partner with this school coordinating ECERS assessments; conducted CLASS™ observations as a contract worker with the local university, and I have been in the field of early childhood education for twenty years. As an "outsider", I am not a state certified early childhood public school pre-kindergarten teacher and I am not affiliated with the local parish school board. It can be argued that the same roles that make the researcher an insider (coordinator, instructor,



observer), also make the researcher an outsider to the case study members. The idea that the researcher is an outsider but also working within can help strengthen the perspective on both sides; although there is no magic method for learning the particulars of the case, field researchers generally recommend that the researcher “hang around” and learn the ropes while forming a variety of different roles, depending on the setting (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Wax, 1971).

**Ethical Concerns.** The researcher followed specific research guidelines established prior to conducting the research study. As a first step, the researcher prepared a time-line of when data would be collected and in what type of data would be collected. Initially, the researcher proposed that data would be collected over a nine-week period. The researcher obtained IRB approval from Louisiana State University’s IRB committee in April of 2018. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher contacted the school principal to explain the project and get permission to proceed. The principal of the school informed the researcher that additional approvals would need to be obtained from the district office, namely two supervisors. The researcher made two attempts to telephone the supervisors. After messages were not returned, by the following week, the researcher sent out electronic communication to the two supervisors to remind them of the original letter of request. One supervisor telephoned the researcher and after discussing the research proposal over the phone, the supervisor informed her that she was allowed to proceed with the study. The only question was if there would be any study of children. The researcher assured the supervisor that no children would be studied and that all personnel names would be anonymous. The supervisor stated that approval would be granted regardless, however, there was additional paperwork that would need to be considered if the researcher were to study children. After the discussion of the proposed qualitative case study, the supervisor approved the project.

An electronic message was sent to the principal to inform her that approvals were obtained from the supervisors and a time was set up to make an initial face-to-face meeting with the principal. A copy of the approved committee proposal was sent to the principal for her review prior to data collection. Individual permission was verbally recorded before beginning individual teacher interviews. Written permission was obtained prior to conducting the focus group (Appendix C). These transcripts were included with all hard copy transcripts of interviews and focus group, copies of primary documents, and the researcher's reflective and methodological journals were kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. The researcher also maintained electronic audio and print data files on two different password-protected computers and was responsible for validating the authenticity of each file. A final precaution to keep the data confidential was to generalize place names and code all personal names in the dissertation, so as not to expose participants' identity.

## **Summary**

This qualitative case study goal was to primarily address how a teacher described her journey to becoming sensitive and what teachers would identify as helpers or hinderers to their sensitivity. The collection of data was carried out as a partnership between researcher and participants, with some input from the researcher's dissertation committee. Prior to beginning the project, the researcher consulted with her dissertation committee for advice on research protocol, proposed research questions to consider, and the proposed data triangulation. The outside member checker reviewed the proposed interview questions for relevance. Interviews were transcribed manually rather than electronically first because the researcher had limited time/training on transcription software and ultimately, the researcher believed that the nuances of each participant's expression in their comments would be more accurately gathered from manual

transcription. Member checking of interview transcripts, one of the ways that Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommended to collaborate with research participants, was an integral part of the research process. As Stake (2000) explained, the ethos of interpretation in any case study involves “seeking out [those values] held by the people within their case” (p.441). Each teacher reviewed and if needed, provided comments on her interview transcript before data analysis began. Member checking for accuracy was recursive throughout the analysis stage. Teacher comments and suggestions during the writing process were invaluable.

The first part of the questions addressed the topics for teachers and was central to the first research question. The last set of questions addressed the second part of the research question. For each of the topics, relevant statements of significance were clustered into overarching statements, then emerging themes were documented (Creswell, 2014).

A narrative was constructed relative to each topic and theme to illustrate how it contributes to a more thorough understanding of teacher sensitivity. Following careful reflection and several reconstructions of the data, the researcher is confident that the following analysis of data accurately depicts the voices from within the teachers that have guided this study. Thus, the intent of this study was to bring to light the voices of teachers describing their views on how they became a sensitive caregiver and what helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive. For more information about the data sources that informed each theme, see Table 15.

As the researcher discovered, themes emerged only after thorough and repeated examination and personal reflection of the data. While common themes emerged, the actual experiences of each participant were unique and relative to her own lived experience with the phenomenon of teacher sensitivity. Through this process, the researcher found the voice of each participant emerging to describe individual perspectives of teacher sensitivity. I intended to

allow the participant's voices to be heard regarding sensitivity in exploring how they became sensitive and what helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive. Chapter 4 includes their voices.

Table 15. List of Emerging Themes and Corresponding Sub-Themes

Theme One: Strategies that enhance/encourage sensitivity	
Sub-Themes	Data Sources that Informed the Theme
Being good listeners	Focus groups, teacher interviews
Promoting literacy skills	
Encouraging empathy	
Observing behavior	Direct observation, focus groups, participant observation, teacher interviews
Theme Two: Supports	
Sub-Themes	Data Sources that Informed the Theme
<i>Foundations</i> Guiding philosophy Administrative support	Artifacts, Documents, Focus Group, Teacher Interviews
<i>Fellowship</i> Comradery Collaboration	Direct Observation, Focus Group, Participant Observation, Teacher Interviews
Theme Three: Sensitivity Disruptors	
Sub-Themes	Data Sources that Informed the Theme
<i>School Factors</i> Interruptions Disorganization Schedule Non-teaching tasks	Artifacts, Direct Observation, Documents, Focus Group, Teacher Interviews
<i>Child Factors</i> Developmental age Lack of emotional regulation	Direct Observation, Focus Group, Participation Observation, Teacher Interviews
<i>Family Factors</i> Engagement Education	Artifacts, Documents, Direct Observation, Focus Group, Participant Observation, Teacher Interviews
<i>Teacher Factors</i> Occupational stress Coping strategies	Focus Group, Teacher Interviews

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This chapter summarizes and presents the findings of the present research study that explored the concept of teacher sensitivity within a Pre-Kindergarten elementary school. The study was guided by two research questions: 1) how a teacher describes his /her journey to becoming sensitive and 2) what do teachers say helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive. Table 15 presents outline of the emerging themes and sub-themes identified through this process.

### **How does a teacher describe his/her journey to becoming sensitive?**

This project sought to understand how a teacher describes his/her journey to becoming sensitive and to find out what teachers say helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive. During four teacher interviews and a focus group with four teachers, Iris, Bonnie, Daisy, Jasmine, Rose, and Sage shared their experiences in teaching. Through the interviews and the focus group, teachers did not distinguish between what made them sensitive and what made them a teacher. There was not enough evidence collected in the interviews or the focus group to answer the first research question; however, it was critical to include the information they did provide to understand their identification of supports and challenges regarding teacher sensitivity.

### **Teacher Introductions**

**Iris.** Iris is a Caucasian woman with over twenty-five years of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teaching experience. She went back to college and received an early childhood endorsement after completing her bachelor's degree to receive an early childhood endorsement. She did work in other areas outside of education, including a church, before she went into the education profession. She had a family and then decided to pursue teaching as a career. She came to work at the school a few years after she had met the principal in another school district. She has worked in this only early childhood program. She described why she became a teacher;

“After I started having kids, I realized I wanted to be home with them, so I went back to school.”

When asked what teacher sensitivity means, she indicated that her definition of sensitivity was a matter of timing and gave the following response:

Taking time to listen so you can find out what their needs are, what they need at that moment. Take the whole temperature of the classroom. This one might be upset, but you assume it might be something else. Take your time to listen and find out. Because they can't always verbalize the way they are feeling. So, you have to try to get them to use their words and talk about it. Which is why it is hard sometimes, and if that doesn't work, then you just have to take the time to 'You need a hug?' and that will suffice for now and maybe later you can come back when they're not upset. So listening is a big part of it. Just trying to find out and just be ready to diffuse before it escalates.

**Bonnie.** Bonnie, a Caucasian woman with over thirty years of teaching experience, described how she became a teacher while working through nursing school. She did not like the hours a nurse worked and wanted something that was more flexible with her role as a mother: “I wanted to have a family, and I wanted to be at home with my children whenever they were not going to be in school.” She also began teaching in another school district then worked in district programs before coming to this school. She described sensitivity as being an intense experience: “I'm always looking for something new. Our kids are very inundated with a lot of stimulus. So, we have to reach them in different ways you know that will stimulate them and connect to them.”

**Daisy.** Daisy, a Caucasian woman with over twenty years of experience, was very proud of her job and described how she became a teacher by earning a degree in elementary education. She did not have the option of earning a certification in early childhood because there was no specialization in pre-kindergarten at the time. She described sensitivity in light of recognizing social skills and being able to respond with sincerity:

The biggest issue is the social skills. Learning how to teach them to recognize how to interact with large groups of children their age, to teach them skills, to interact appropriately and have those social skills they need to be successful when they get into kindergarten and the rest of elementary school.

**Jasmine.** Jasmine, a Caucasian woman with a bachelor's degree in Child and Family Studies has over nine years of teaching experience. She is a paraprofessional at the school; however, during the research project, she assumed the role of lead teacher for long periods of time working with a substitute teacher during a staffing change that occurred during the mid-year. She was present for one of the interviews, and her responses are included in this paper in the context of the themes presented. Jasmine, described her background through earning a bachelor's degree in Child and Family Studies. She never became a certified teacher: "I did do subbing, worked with different teachers and saw how they taught. I just did strictly Pre-K. I did try subbing other grades at first, but I really enjoy the younger children."

**Sage.** Sage had just retired the previous school year. She is a grandmother. She has thirty years of teaching experience and six years of being an assistant teacher before that. She described sensitivity as being sincere as she gets to know her students:

The surroundings and what's going on at the time, you come to know your students. You know their personalities. Their personality changes and possibly you know about their background. It does help. Be aware. Adapt to change and be ready to change. You never know what personality changes they're gonna have, so you have to adapt to their changes.

**Rose.** Rose had just retired in the last six months before the focus group, and she counted college and "nursery school" and said she had over forty-four years of experience in education. Rose defined sensitivity as being able to proactively and intensely respond to the interactions of children in the classroom:

Teacher sensitivity is basically being able to take the temperature of the room to see who needs what, when, and where. That's really important. Especially if we're talking about if someone has a meltdown. Like a pre-emptive strike so to speak. Try and be prepared for and everything. You start your day off, 'OK, this is what I'm gonna do, this is the materials I am gonna need.' Try and organize yourself. Sometimes things don't always work out. We talked about teachable moments. You know, you try and be prepared the best you can. You know sensitivity is just trying to pick up on what certain children need. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's not.

Iris, Bonnie, Daisy, and Jasmine, Sage, and Rose together had over 100 years of teaching experience among them. They each described their journey to how they became teachers and how they came to work at the school. A few of the teachers offered their definitions of sensitivity, which reflected the sincerity, intensity of response, and the timing of interactions. In the next section, Iris, Bonnie, Daisy, and Jasmine, along with two of their recently retired co-workers, Sage and Rose, describe supports and challenges to teacher sensitivity.

### **What helps or hinders teachers' ability to be sensitive?**

Teacher sensitivity is the ability to notice and respond to children's cues in the moment (Hamre, et al. 2014, p. 1260). A primary area of inquiry for the present project was to uncover what teachers believe helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive. A systematic analysis of the data uncovered three central themes and ten sub-themes (Table 1). Theme one is *Strategies that Enhance/Encourage Teacher Sensitivity*. Theme two is *Supports for Sensitivity* and theme three is *Sensitivity Disruptors*. In the following discussion, each theme and the related sub-themes will be described and illustrated with excerpts from the data.

Theme one, *Strategies that enhance/encourage sensitivity*, emerged when analyzing the responses of the teachers referring to what specific strategies, they use that support their sensitivity. Four sub-themes developed as they related to the main characteristics of sensitivity (Sincerity, Intensity of Response, and Timing) and are identified as follows respectively: (Sincerity) *being good listeners and encouraging empathy*; (Intensity of Response) *promoting literacy skills*; and (Timing) *observing behavior*. Sincerity, intensity of response, and timing are characteristics of a sensitive response based on research of several working definitions of teacher sensitivity.



Being a good listener was a strategy the teachers used to help them recognize children's cues. Encouraging empathy was a strategy the teachers used that helped them to encourage children and to recognize, connect, and accept children, an aspect of teacher sensitivity that is characteristic of sincerity. Promoting literacy was a specific teacher skill that they used to help children to be able to recognize their feelings and the feelings of others, and maintaining morale afforded children the opportunity to be able to begin to vocalize their feelings, helping teachers to be engaged with children with a degree of intensity. Observing behavior, maintaining composure, and adapting to change were strategies teachers used as they looked at the timing of their interactions. Sincerity, intensity, and the timing of responses all reflect the current definition of teacher sensitivity used in this project and were elements of the definition of teacher sensitivity in which the sub-themes were embedded.

Theme two, *Supports for Sensitivity*, emerged as aspects of the early childhood work environment that support sensitivity. *Foundations and fellowship* reflect the support that teachers received in the school and amongst each other. Three basic types of support were identified which included emotional support, informational support, and instrumental support. These two sub-themes represented *Theme one: Supports for Sensitivity*. As certain elements of the school environment were described by the teachers as strong supports of teacher sensitivity, foundations emerged as characteristics that have deep roots within the school itself and are shared by all teachers and seemed to support teacher sensitivity. The key foundational components of this school include the adoption of a guiding philosophy (informational support) and the strong administrative support which provided (emotional, informational, and instrumental support) for faculty both inside and outside of the classroom. *Fellowship* includes the ability of the faculty to work, support, and socialize among each other inside and outside of the classroom and

represented (emotional, informational, and instrumental support). Fellowship emerged once teachers began to discuss how they were able to gather together, share their good wishes and positive thoughts for the day, and wish each other well, similar to gathering in any space that promotes supporting and socializing with others. Teachers reported a strong sense of camaraderie among each other and were deeply connected to their coworkers, which was a source of emotional support. In addition, teachers reported that they could work together and collaborate with respect to teaching strategies and socialization outside of work, which was a source of informational and instructional support. The foundations within the school gave teachers instructional and instrumental support and the fellowship that was expressed by teachers further provided them with emotional support and informational support. *Foundations and fellowship* were sub-themes that were consistent with support for teacher sensitivity.

Theme three emerged as *Sensitivity Disruptors*, which included sub-themes such as: *School Factors, Child Factors, Family Factors, and Teacher Factors*. School factors like interruptions, disorganization, the schedule, and non-teaching tasks were reported by teachers to significantly reduce the amount of time they had in the classroom to be available to respond to children. Child factors, such as the developmental age of children and their lack of social-emotional regulation skills, were also considered challenges to teachers' abilities to respond with sincerity and in a timely manner. Family factors, such as their level of engagement and their education emerged as teachers described the challenges of working with families that were challenges to the teachers' ability to recognize children's needs. Finally, teacher factors emerged as teachers recognized aspects of their job that were consistent with occupational stress and they identified coping strategies that they practiced handling such events in the classroom.

The first theme, *Strategies that enhance/encourage sensitivity*, is defined by four sub-themes: *Being a Good Listener*, *Encouraging Empathy*, *Promoting Literacy Skills*, and *Observing Behavior*. Theme two, *Supports for Sensitivity*, is defined by two sub-themes; the first one is *Foundations*, which explores how the school supports the teachers, and the second one is *Fellowship*, which explores how the teachers, themselves, engage in encouraging, nurturing, and caring interactions among each other as an additional support. The third theme, *Sensitivity Disruptors*, is defined by four sub-themes: School Factors, which explore aspects of the school, Child Factors, which explore characteristics of the children, Family Factors, which explore components of engagement and education as they relate to families, and Teacher Factors, which explore occupational stress as a disruptor and coping strategies teachers use to overcome disruptions. Each major theme and sub-theme are listed in Table 1, *List of Emerging Themes and Corresponding Sub-Themes*. A more complete discussion of each of these sub-themes is described in the next section.

### **Theme One: Strategies that Enhance/Encourage Teacher Sensitivity**

Theme one emerged as *Strategies that Enhance/Encourage Teacher Sensitivity* and was a theme that emerged during analysis. This refers to the specific strategies that teachers identified that they practiced in the classroom to increase their awareness into detecting children's cues. Many of the strategies used by the teachers were those that were highlighted in the "*Conscious Discipline*" guidebook (Bailey, 2015) but were also developmentally appropriate practices used by teachers. The characteristics of teacher sensitivity have been defined earlier in this paper and include the degree to which the teacher responds to cues from children (sincerity), the manner in which that response is given (intensity of response), and the ability to notice cues before a child communicates his/her needs (timing). The specific teaching strategies reported by the teachers as

they related to these three defining characteristics of sensitivity include (Sincerity) being good listeners and encouraging empathy, (Intensity of Response) promoting literacy skills, and (Timing) observing behavior. These sub-components and how they relate to teacher sensitivity are discussed in the next section.

**Being Good Listeners.** Being a good listener allows teachers to tailor the sincerity of their responses with more accuracy, which is a component of teacher sensitivity. The teachers identified listening to children as one strategy that they used to get to know children better and to understand their needs and wants with greater accuracy. Iris describes that the teacher's job is to listen to a child's needs. In addition, she mentions that a teacher must also understand that he or she may not be able to immediately resolve a child's problem or immediately diffuse a situation. In the focus group discussion, Iris indicated that a teacher needs to be ready to listen (timing) to a child's cues and be available to provide a response (sincere and intensity of response).

Taking the time to listen (timing). So, you can find out what their needs are, what they need at that moment (sincerity). [Looks at Rose] like you were saying, to take the whole temperature of the classroom (intensity). This one might be upset, but you assume it might be something else. Take your time to listen and find out (timing). Because they can't always verbalize the way they are feeling. So, you have to try to get them to use their words and talk about it (sincerity). Which is why it is hard sometimes, and if that doesn't work, then you must have to take the time to 'You need a hug?' (sincerity) and that will suffice for now, and maybe later, you can come back when they're not upset. That's about it. So listening is a big part (intensity). Just trying to find out and like she was saying, sometimes, you just have to be ready to diffuse before it escalates (intensity).

A strategy that Iris and Rose used was to take time to listen, which helped them to notice, which is to be able to verbally describe what is happening in the classroom and is taken from the "*Conscious Discipline*" (Bailey, 2015) guidebook. Teachers must take the temperature of the classroom and be able to see what children need before reacting to a situation. The way a teacher reacts to a child will reflect his or her sincerity. This strategy was revealed to be helpful to both Iris and Rose as they expressed that being a good listener helped them to respond sensitively.

**Encouraging Empathy.** Empathy reflects the degree to which a person can understand and share in the feelings of another and was expressed as a helpful strategy and is also representative of a characteristic of sensitivity which is sincerity. Teachers at this school were expected to show children how to develop empathy through purposeful guidance as stated in the “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015) guidebook. This purposeful guidance, which implies that a teacher must describe what a child is doing, name the feeling the child is communicating, and also acknowledge the child’s desire with a positive intent while validating the experience is an aspect of teacher sensitivity (sincerity). A certain degree of sincerity is needed to engage in this strategic, sensitive strategy. Developing empathy is a strategy Rose and Iris described as being a useful strategy to support teacher sensitivity and was modeled by the administration. Rose expressed that acknowledging a child’s desire was useful: “Just making them aware of different things, changes, different ways of handling things.” Iris felt that the administration was trying to model behavior that they wanted her to model in the classroom, which was supportive of her efforts to be sensitive:

They [Administration] always say, you need to put this out, you need to put that out. Then the flip side of that is that we have to do the same things as the students [do]. Now you want to tell [the child] something positive (sincerity). Not, ‘You forgot your book sack?’ [Have to] Give the good mornings and the hugs in first (timing).

Iris expressed that using empathy was different from the [old way] of interacting with children. Using empathy is a sincere form of response to children and reflects a characteristic of sensitivity. It was a strategy that helped both teachers and children learn to regulate their emotions and handle uncomfortable or negative feelings. Using empathy as a strategy was a part of being sensitive:

Using “*Conscious Discipline*” this year, there is a lot more vocabulary and communication. As far as old school, you could say, ‘No, you can’t do that because it’s not safe because it’s reading time, go sit down.’ Or ‘Follow directions this is how it’s supposed to be.’ Now it’s a little more sensitive. [Voice gets slower and dragged out]

‘Now it’s our group time (sincerity). You can sit here in this chair or on the floor, which one works best for you?’ (sincerity, intensity). You are trying to get that child on board without having a meltdown (timing).

Iris explained that she had to change her strategy to accommodate the new way of interacting with children based on what she learned from the text adopted by the school. Encouraging empathy is a conscious and intentional strategy that was promoted in the “*Conscious Discipline*” guidebook (Bailey, 2015) and required teachers to do some self-reflection in order for them to engage in purposeful and meaningful interactions with children. Teachers indicated that encouraging empathy among children helped them to be able to recognize children’s cues (timing) and gave them a way to manage their negative feelings so they could help children to manage and respond (sincerity, intensity) to children’s cues, which is part of teacher sensitivity. Childcare centers that have been able to offer more professional support to teachers appeared to have teachers who were more sensitive in their caregiving and applied developmentally appropriate methods of teaching (Manlove, 2008).

The researcher noted instances of the teachers using the strategy of encouraging empathy, which would be characteristic of teacher sensitivity (sincerity) on several occasions (carpool drop off, entrance into the classroom, entrance into physical education class, and departure from music class). The researcher observed examples of teachers getting down to children’s eye level (sincerity) and asking them what type of greeting/departure (intensity of response), they would like that day: (high five, handshake, elbow bump). The researcher noted that teachers hugged children, used a calm, soft tone of voice when speaking with them, and generally tried to respond to children when they need attention (timing) and in the manner they wanted to be responded to (intensity of response).

In addition, the researcher engaged in participant observation at the Teacher In-Service on August 3rd and made notes that suggested that the administration was supportive of teachers’

efforts to develop empathy. The following is an account of an activity that was observed as a way to get teachers to take the perspective of children, which would allow them to assist children in learning how to develop empathy themselves.

The District did an activity with seashells that I was able to participate in. I got one and collected it (Artifact #1) and I participated in the activity. The teachers at the table where I was seated at invited me to sit closer with them so I could participate, so I did. They welcomed me into their group. The activity talked about seashells and how they are delicate. Just like the children, some are beautiful and strong. Each one is different, but they are all put in the same bucket. (Participant Observation #1).

The administrator told teachers to take the seashell with them and describe why it was chosen and told them to take the shell back to the classroom:

Now, collect a shell that you want to keep. You can bring it with you into your classroom. Now, turn to the other person at your table and tell him/her why you chose this shell. [Shell collected from this event]. (Artifact, Participant Observation #2).

The administrator requested that each teacher select a seashell from a bag of seashells. This activity was an attempt to help teachers to realize that each child is different just like each seashell is different, and you must take some time to study the children and appreciate their diversity. Then she offered this analogy of the shell and the uniqueness of a child:

Maybe the shell is cracked. Maybe it is beautiful. Each one is unique. Maybe you know someone who is broken. [making a shell/child analogy]. Each student in your class is unique, too. What will you do with each shell (child) now that they are in your class? Make connections with every child. How can you do it? How can you make connections with grandparents? Talk at your table about this. (Participant Observation #3).

In this series of participant observation notes, it is clear that the administration is trying to develop a sense of support and promote empathy among the faculty so that teachers can take this strategy and model it with the children in the classroom. Iris detailed how she helps children validate their experiences in the classroom: “Everyone has a job. Everyone has a responsibility. We’re here to help each other.” This is also a strategy taken from the “*Conscious Discipline*” guidebook (Bailey, 2015). In this quote, it is evident that Iris is trying to acknowledge the child’s

place in the classroom and validate the child's experiences and contributions to the classroom community, which helps to promote empathy in the group setting.

The researcher observed a classroom and noted that there was a helper chart on the wall. There were twenty different types of helper jobs in the classroom. Each child had a job each day to help to take care of the whole classroom. The strategy of creating jobs for children caused teachers to have to think about the types of jobs that would provide the social and emotional support that they needed. Giving children jobs was a form of expressing encouragement, which required teachers to notice (timing), connect (intensity), and accept (sincerity) children which encompasses each part of the definition of teacher sensitivity.

**Promoting Socio-Emotional Literacy Skills.** Teachers help children develop social and emotional competence by intentionally supporting their social and emotional health using language, reading books, and role-playing., were ways to manage the intensity of responses, which were reflective of sensitivity. Daisy, Iris, and Rose used language to promote literacy skills in the classroom. Because language made recognizing children's cues easier, the more children were able to use language, the easier it was for teachers to gauge the intensity of their responses to children as they engaged in interactions with them. Daisy explained the fact that oftentimes children have trouble because they do not have the language to communicate their needs:

Because a lot of the kids that struggle, struggle because they don't have those skills and they don't have the language to even ask for... to be able to even develop skills so that they can be successful in the classroom. That's the ones who end up having behavior issues in the classroom. They don't know how to interact.

Daisy is describing the reason children have problems in the classroom. She indicates that children are still developing language skills at this age. Teachers indicated that teaching socioemotional literacy skills was beneficial to teacher sensitivity because having more



socioemotional literacy skills can increase language. This gives a child more ways to communicate and express negative feelings which can send a signal to a teacher as to when to respond to him or her (timing) and the degree to which they need to react (sincerity) to accurately meet the child's needs.

Sage reflected on using books during the focus group: "Small groups help with that and um, just talking to them during story time and vocabulary." Rose described how using books helps support group social skills:

Cause you know some of them haven't been exposed. So, when you have a whole group like that and when they hear these answers coming from their friends. We did a lot of books like that you know.

In addition to Sage talking about how books help with social skills, Iris and Rose also shared that reading books about this topic, as well as role-playing, were strategies they used to help children learn social skills and help children to express negative or uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. The ability to respond to children's cues accurately in order to meet their needs is the essence of teacher sensitivity. Promoting socioemotional literacy skills helps the child to better communicate his/her needs which helps a teacher develop the response in a way that can reflect what the child really needs at that moment, a key indicator of teacher sensitivity.

Iris shared that role-playing or perspective taking was a strategy she used to model appropriate behavior: "Something that's going wrong and getting them involved and then role playing you know." Iris used the idea of role-play as a way to get children to practice language skills. This strategy is also in the book, "*Conscious Discipline*." During the focus group, Rose described how vocabulary was essential and could be developed by things happening in the classroom:

If something even happened in the classroom, we even talked about that. "How could we have made this or what did they do? What was done that was acceptable or what should we have done? How could it have been different?"

Role-playing was a strategy designed to give children practice in using language skills. Teachers described socioemotional literacy activities as a way to bring out language in children. Teaching socioemotional literacy skills helps children communicate their needs which in turn makes it easier for teachers to respond sensitively to them because their cues were easier to detect when they used language to communicate with the teacher and with other children.

**Observing Behavior.** The strategy of using observations was identified as helpful to teachers in order for them to engage in sensitive interactions because observations assist teachers in helping them with the timing of responses, a key characteristic of sensitivity. Sage described how observations help to get to know students: “After a while you come to know your students; you know their personalities.” Teachers reported that observing behavior helps them to gauge their reaction (sincerity) and response to cues (intensity of response). A teacher must know the child in order to accurately respond to their needs with greater precision, and observations were reported to help them to get to know children better. Iris and Rose described observing behavior and the specific things that can be learned from this strategy:

During circle time, how they play with others. Side by side play. During center time, learning how they play with others. That side by side play. They’re getting in there and working together or not working together.

Observing behavior was a strategy that teachers recounted as continually occurring while they were building relationships with children. Iris defined this strategy as “an ongoing process.” Teachers expressed how the more they were able to understand a child, the more accurate their responses were to them. Rose also connected the observation process and teacher sensitivity, “And it’s through observations. Watching them. How they interact. Through observations you assess, you know, you watch. You just see a light.” Iris noted that, through observations, you can see their “personality changes” and possibly even “get to know their background.” This is supported by the researcher field notes, which documented the support staff, teachers, and

administrators were visible and engaging with students during the day. Figure 2 displays an example of the strollers that teachers use with children. In addition, the researcher noted that the physical environment was welcoming and supportive of all students. Rose described how observations can help with academic and social skills, two components of children's development to which a teacher must be ready to respond to, "When they come to us to do an assessment, we see where they are academically. And then throughout that you can see some of their social skills." Sage described observations as "knowing the surroundings of individual children and being ready to change" which are key factors in sensitive interactions, and she further identified observations as a way to "come to know your students." Teachers reported that observations help them to more accurately respond (timing) to children and understand children on a deeper level (sincerity). Participant observation revealed that teachers begin their relationships with children by getting to know them and by observing their interactions with adults and other children:

Observations were seen during Testing Day (centers in a library where they were playing with toys), August 7th. A lead teacher and her assistant teacher sat at the table and collected paperwork from parents, then the lead teacher spoke to the child and asked the child to accompany her to the classroom for some "play time". The assistant teacher informed me that the child would be observed in how he/she interacted with other children in the group setting and would be asked some questions as he/she played in centers. After about fifteen minutes, the teacher and the child returned to the table. (Participant Observation #4).

To further support evidence of these strategies, the researcher collected a brochure (Document #1) that was about an in-service training regarding the contents of the book, "Conscious Discipline," where these strategies were discussed in more detail. On August 5th, the book was discussed at a workshop while teachers learned how to implement "Conscious Discipline." In addition, the researcher collected a document that was called, "Behavior Calendar" (Document #2). This is a document that reflects the observation strategy discussed in

the book. Teacher strategies such as being good listeners, encouraging empathy, promoting socioemotional literacy skills, and observing behavior are reported to be used by the teachers to assist them in their responses to cues from children in a timely and intense manner, the essence of sensitive teaching. These strategies are reflective of the characteristics of sensitivity and are also a part of the core of the school's guiding philosophy, which is based on the book, "Conscious Discipline" (Bailey, 2015).



Figure 2. Strollers are available in the event that children need to be taken for a ride or moved quickly (timing).

## **Theme Two: Supports for Sensitivity**

Teachers described several critical factors that impacted their ability to detect children's cues and respond to them, particularly those present in the professional work setting or program itself. These supports can be categorized broadly as emotional (feelings), informational (knowledge), or instrumental (strategic) in nature. The program's guiding philosophy, based on the book "Conscious Discipline," (Bailey, 2015) was frequently cited by the teachers as being an important informational support that they used to help them learn to regulate their own emotions and to help children develop their own emotional competence. There was support from the administration, which could be categorized as all three types of support (emotional, informational, and instrumental). Principals and early childhood program leaders influence school goals, practices, policies, and socialization (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). There was evidence of strong emotional support of faculty, especially in respecting teachers' lives outside of the classroom and providing assistance to help teachers manage their work/life balance. Teachers identified specific instrumental supports during focus group interactions, and these were confirmed during researcher participant observations and direct observations. These instrumental supports included being good listeners, encouraging empathy, promoting socioemotional literacy skills, and observing behavior.

### **Foundations.**

***Guiding Philosophy.*** A guiding philosophy is representative of a worldview, a holistic approach to a situation. The adoption of a guiding philosophy that was unique to this case was a central component of this school. This book was the first artifact (Figure 3, Artifact #2) that the principal gave to me when I met with her for our interview. She was excited to share this new strategy that her school and the entire school district had adopted. This book guides teachers in using effective strategies that facilitate their conscious interactions with children.

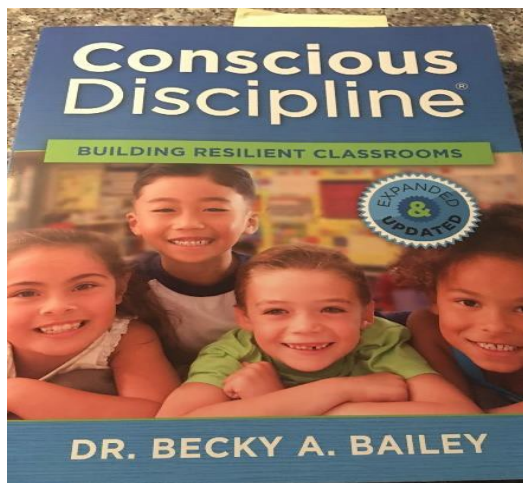


Figure 3. “Conscious Discipline” book (Bailey, 2015). Photograph of book from which the guiding philosophy at the school is taken.

The strategies are designed to help teachers become more emotionally competent so as to be able to assist children with the development of emotional competence through a series of strategies which also served to teach children how to regulate their emotions and create a compassionate and resilient classroom environment. This instructional support was also an emotional support for teachers and children. This guiding philosophy focuses on self-regulation. The quote on the inside of the book, “Be the change you want to see in the world,” is one that the principal also recited as she described the relationships between teachers and children and is also the subject of chapter four in the book. This book’s strategies were supported by the district, modeled by school administrators, embraced by faculty, given to families, and practiced with children. Daisy referred to this guiding philosophy as being helpful for teachers in teaching social-emotional skills to children:

“Conscious Discipline is wonderful, and it’s about giving them those skills. So that they [teachers] just don’t fuss at them because they [children] don’t have the skills or they didn’t do it correctly.” The book and the foundational philosophy were introduced to parents by the school district supervisor, the school principal, and a lead pre-kindergarten teacher at orientation. The school district’s early childhood supervisor led the discussion:

We are starting year two of a new program, ‘Conscious Discipline.’ Young children under the age of seven do not have the skills to regulate their emotions, so it’s our responsibility as adults to give them the tools in their backpack when they’re upset, frustrated, angry or scared. We have a team of resource coordinators and find ways to improve the learning for your child. So, it’s a team effort to ensure we meet the needs of every child. (Participant Observation #5)

One particular strategy was introduced to families in the form of active participation so they could practice how to use the strategy with children. The principal asked parents to get involved in practicing one of the skills used in “Conscious Discipline,” “I’m going to ask that everyone please stand so you can see. Get a partner.” Once everyone was standing, the principal requested that Daisy, a lead pre-kindergarten teacher who participated in this project, demonstrate one of the skills called “Power of Perception” which is about insight, “The power of perception reminds us composure is a choice we can make, regardless of how crazy the outside world appears to be” (Bailey, 2015, p.86). The icon for the Power of Perception is a star. The researcher observed how Daisy stood in front of a group of over 200 parents, faculty, school staff, and district and community members to practice this skill with the entire audience:

One of the very first self-regulation skills we will teach your children is what we call (STAR): Smile, Take a Deep Breath, and Relax. All it is if they’re sick or nervous,

whatever, especially Monday or Tuesday [the first two days of school], we do ‘STOP, TAKE a deep breath, AND, RELAX (STAR). We do it three times. [Does it with the crowd] [Crowd cheers]. (Participant Observation Note #6)

Teaching this skill to families was a way to help them learn about emotional competence with the hope that they would practice these skills at home. During this exercise, families were given tools to help them to help their children develop emotional competence. Families have a major influence on children’s social-emotional regulation skills (Bocknek, et al. 2009; Cole, 2003; Cole, et al. 2004; Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Kim & Kochaska, 2012). Given how important parents are, there is a connection to factors that contribute to family caregiving, such as psychological well-being and social support that are likely to influence teacher sensitivity (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2006, p. 328). The family and the school can practice the same strategies, and therefore, reinforce skills both at home and at school.

The immersion of this philosophy into the parent orientation highlights the focus that the school placed on helping families support children’s social-emotional skill development at home. Participant observation notes describe the STAR approach described by Daisy at the orientation being practiced by teachers, children, and a few family members in a classroom setting. It is clear from this note that teachers are practicing this approach with children:

The teacher was conducting a lesson on learning the hand gestures to a song. The children would repeat what the teacher told them to say. A few of the children became restless. The teacher reminded the children, ‘Let’s do our STAR, smile, take a deep breath, and relax!’ The children followed the teacher’s lead and repeated STAR three times. This brought the group back into focus so they could continue the lesson. (Participant Observation Note #7)

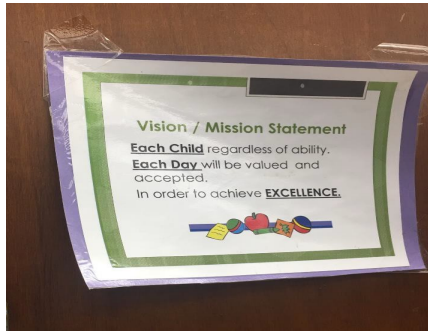
This observation is evidence that exemplifies how this philosophy is practiced by faculty in the classroom with the children. It was observed that most children knew and understood the approach, engaging in the exercise with ease and enthusiasm. When children are using the same approach to regulate their emotions, it is may be easier to detect the cues that they send to



teachers, making it easier to differentiate those who may be having trouble. Protocols like this help to create an environment where it is easier to recognize children's feelings, which may make it easier to respond sensitively to them. To further support this foundational philosophy, the researcher collected a note to families about an upcoming workshop on "Conscious Discipline" (Bailey, 2015) along with a letter reminding families about this event (Document #3). Daisy also reflected on the use of this philosophy in her interview:

We teach them social skills. That is one good thing we use now, "Conscious Discipline." It is wonderful, and it's about giving them those social skills. So that they [teachers] just don't fuss at them because they don't... Because they don't have the skills. They didn't do it correctly.

This quote illuminates how a teacher has to be aware of what children need and of their developmental skills and abilities at this level in order to respond to their cues to the degree to which they need assistance. This philosophy reflects how teachers respond to children at this school. Figure 4 shows an example of the school's mission statement which was displayed throughout the campus. This guidebook provides teachers with a new way of integrating social-emotional skills into the classroom through consciously teaching children how to self-regulate their emotions, which may be a key support of teacher sensitivity. Teachers have another way to detect and respond to children's cues with this example. Curby, et. al. (2013) suggested that a classroom conducive to learning is one where the children know what to expect and where those who need support are given greater attention so that children can feel more secure with their teacher and can attend to learning tasks. When a teacher can detect a child's cues and more accurately respond to the child while successfully meeting his or her needs, this may make it easier to respond with a higher degree of sincerity, a key characteristic of sensitivity.



*Figure 4. Vision and Mission Statement. This is an example of the school's vision and mission statement, "Each child regardless of ability, each day will be valued and accepted in order to achieve excellence."*

**Administrative Support.** Administrators at this school were identified as the principal and assistant principal, as well as other non-teaching faculty who made decisions and supported the teachers, such as resource coordinators and counselors. Administrators who are supportive and offer sincerity for teachers' personal lives can help to shape the classroom environment to make it easier for a teacher to respond to children by taking away some of the stressors that are associated with balancing work and life. During the interview and the focus group, teachers described qualities associated with a strong foundation as being related to an environment that promotes sensitive caregiving.

Teachers in both the interviews and the focus group voiced how supportive the administrative personnel (principal, assistant principal, resource coordinators, and school counselors) were when it came to teachers' classrooms, "The curriculum they give us is great" and is a reflection of the emotional and instrumental support they received from the administration. The administration was available to assist the teachers when they had to attend to personal situations. One example of this family type model comes from "Conscious Discipline." The school used this model of family by using the "Conscious Discipline" strategy. The school created a Kindness Tree and a Wish

Well board to show support for faculty. They shared their experiences of how important the principal and the assistant principal were in helping teachers resolve situations in the classroom, “They were both there, I go straight to them” and by giving them the support they needed when they had issues in their personal and family lives. “At 11:00 o’clock at night when you start getting sick, you know you can text your Assistant Principal.” Teachers were describing the administration as being a positive emotional and instrumental support, and this may help them to be more sensitive.

Teachers reported that being at a school with an administration who was sympathetic and understanding of their lives outside of work created a classroom environment that made it easier to focus on their ability to notice children’s cues and to be able to respond to them while in the classroom. For example, Iris described how she leans on her administrators when there is a problem: “When there is a problem, we’re able to go to the administration and they will assist.” She also indicated that there are others who provide assistance: “If I had a concern with a student, whether it’s a social skill or what [ever], I can go to the counselor, and if I still have an issue, I can definitely let the resource coordinator know.” Iris’ voice characterized the administration as a source of instrumental support when she needed help, a reflection of support that is needed in order to respond to children’s cues with intensity and sincerity.

Daisy's sentiment about the administration is also reflected in the interview with Bonnie, who remembered a difficult time in her life when her father died. She commented on how the administration supported her during this time, an example of emotional support: "The principal was very good about making sure I was 'OK' and the Assistant Principal at the time was very good about making sure I was 'OK.' They are very supportive. If you need to take off for family... It's family first." The administration's support was something that Bonnie found valuable, and she appreciated having the support of her supervisors in her time of crisis: "That was nice." In addition to problems that arise from faculty, the administration was also cited as being supportive in family matters involving children. Jasmine characterized the campus as a place where "Everybody gets together, you know, teachers, children, parents, grandparents. It just makes it a family feeling here for everybody." Iris explained that when there is a family issue that affects the child outside of the classroom, she can rely on the administration's support. This level of instrumental support was reflected in her discussion of an on-going legal situation among parents: "We had a situation with a custody battle, 'So-n-So's here and So-n-So's here; please come help me!' So, they were both there." The teachers can rely on the administration to help handle situations that arise that are beyond the teachers' scope.

Bonnie also found it easy to approach the administration when she had concerns. “I just go straight to them. If I had a concern with a student, whether it’s a social skill or whatever, I go to the counselor, cause that’s what she’s there for.” Bonnie is describing multiple people within the school that she can lean on for support. She also relied on the support staff: “I definitely let the Resource Coordinator know.”

Iris also explained the ease in which she can go to the administration to get assistance. This reflects another example of instrumental support: “I requested a home visit and the principal went there to check on the child.” Zinsser and Curby (2014) identified characteristics that may be associated with teacher’s emotional support of children, including the program management practices and teachers’ personal experiences and satisfaction in the workplace. Bonnie described her ability to rely on the administration to offer her both emotional and instrumental support in personal and work-related issues, which was characteristic of a high-quality work environment (Gerber, et al. 2007).

The administration’s support to help faculty take care of personal needs was an example of emotional support that teachers received and may have contributed to Bonnie’s positive view of her work environment: “I mean if you wake up, and it’s three o’clock in the morning and you have a bad stomach virus, it happened to me, every year something happens.” She felt comfortable to go to the administration for work or personal issues. Daisy described how the school is supportive of taking care of personal matters and indicated this was a source of support:

“School helps to cover staffing issues amongst each other as a way to help faculty take care of personal needs.” If a teacher’s personal needs are met, she is more likely to be able to focus on and respond to the children’s cues in a timely manner, a key aspect of teacher sensitivity. This reflects a level of perceived supportiveness, the idea that the school environment is recognized by the staff to resemble the best practices for teaching children in a manner that supports the teacher as well as the developmental level of the child (Manlove, et al. 2008).

The researcher also found evidence to support this during participant observations from the Teacher In-Service on August 3rd. In this context, the early childhood supervisor wanted teachers to recognize their own efforts and is reflected in researcher notes.

“The early childhood supervisor says, “We have a lot of new teachers and para-educators. If you are new, please stand.” From all of us, we wish you well.” (Participant Note #8)

The administrator who was the head of the entire early childhood program in the school district was called the early childhood supervisor. She wanted to wish everyone well as they begun the new year, which would be indicative of a supportive environment that helps teacher sensitivity. The administration embraced a supportive climate, starting with its relationships with parents, faculty, and children:

During participant observation of parent orientation, the principal said, “Each day, each child, excellence,” and referred to “The African proverb, ‘It takes a Village.’ (Participant Observation Note #9).

The researcher also confirmed the level of support from the administration during the climate walk where it was observed that adults have separate spaces from children for gathering, eating, and using the restroom. There was additional evidence seen to support the notion that the administration is supportive.

During climate walk #1, it was noted that there was access to professional reading materials and links to in-services and additional training located in the faculty lounge. In addition, community resources were displayed in adult spaces for personal and family needs. For example, in the office, there is a box with the sign “teacher award nomination forms.” Parents are invited to nominate a teacher for the award of Teacher of the Year or make a comment about a positive thing that the teachers have done. The parents could place these in a box on a desk once they were completed. The researcher also collected a form that was sent home to the parents to nominate a teacher for recognition. (Artifact #2, Reference #1)

A supportive environment is a central foundational characteristic of this case that teachers described as being important to support teacher sensitivity. The teachers felt that the administration was supportive of their efforts to teach and in their personal lives outside of the classroom. Quality programs create a culture of sensitivity. This school gave teachers emotional support, which included providing teachers with the tools they needed to recognize and respond

to children so that they can provide support to those who needed greater attention (Curby, et. al., 2013). Training for teachers ensures that they have the tools needed to be sensitive in spite of the many factors in the classroom that can divert their attention. The administration recognized this need for emotional support and the use of the guiding philosophy, “Conscious Discipline” was evidence of this support. Figures 5-8 are examples of displays around the school for faculty, children, and parents.



Figure 5. Faculty Birthday Board.

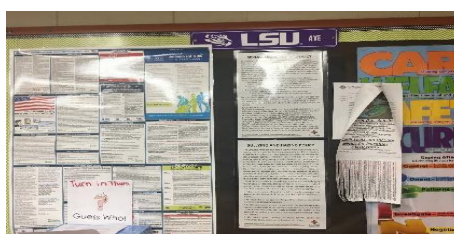


Figure 6. Faculty Communication Board.



Figure 7. Displays in Other Languages.



Figure 8. Children's Artwork on Display.



***Fellowship.*** Fellowship is a component of the professional work setting, helping faculty create strong connections with each other, which can support teacher sensitivity. Teachers described certain characteristics of their relationships with each other that were both emotionally and instructionally supportive. These teacher characteristics have been divided into two main groups, which include camaraderie and collaboration.

***Camaraderie.*** Camaraderie reflects the emotional support of teachers and is a characteristic of fellowship that embodies the mutual trust and friendship among people who spend large amounts of time together. Characteristics of faculty camaraderie were identified by Iris: “There is a team to help each other,” and Sage, as she reflected on the importance of connections teachers had in their school: “If our school did not work together as a faculty and help each other out, it would be very hard.” Four teachers in both the teacher interviews and the focus group reported a tight bond among faculty which strengthened their interpersonal relationships. The teachers reported that they believed their coworkers supported them both in and out of the classroom: “The teachers work well together, we have fun themes, dress-up days; we try to make it a fun place.” Teachers reported that their sense of belonging to the school community was strengthened through their ability to work together, which made them more confident in their work with children. This is consistent with teachers who exhibited more teamwork in early childhood settings where they were shown to have a greater capacity for planning and interacting with children during playtime and were able to be flexible to meet their needs (Ekholm & Hedin, 1987). Jasmine described the climate: “It’s just a very unique, fun school. We stick together; if there’s anything, if someone is going through something. Yes, very supportive.” Jasmine felt a sense of unity, the ability to share ideas and resources, and she was surrounded by a faculty that was considerate of each other and was willing to help one other with

administrative tasks. Jasmine reported that there was support for each other in their personal lives. Jasmine's sentiment was reflected in others' statements that highlighted how the camaraderie and collegiality among them was a significant part of the emotional support they received.

Teachers described how emotional and informational support profoundly impacted their work. Teachers described being able to bounce ideas off each other, debrief about experiences in the classroom, and share strategies and suggestions with each other. Teachers reported that support from their coworkers made them able to meet daily challenges. This theme situates nicely with the concept of teacher sensitivity, which is being able to respond to cues with sincerity, intensity, and timing. If teachers felt that they could go through a difficult interaction and had their colleagues to share the experience with, it allowed them to work on the skills provided in "Conscious Discipline" (Bailey, 2015) and go through these experiences with their colleagues. Teachers who exhibited more teamwork were more active in planning and interacting with children during play while being flexible to their needs (Ekholm & Hedin, 1987), a key characteristic of teacher sensitivity.

Teachers reported that they felt supported by other faculty and had strong ties both inside and outside of the school environment. Iris, who participated in both the interview and focus group, shared how she felt her colleague's support helped her to respond sensitively to children: "It's like, 'I can do this!' "We try to make it a fun place." Iris was describing the emotional support she received from her colleagues, how having the support of colleagues made her feel more powerful as if she could do what needed to be done for the children, which is responding to them.

Having coworkers who are also a friend can make the school day more enjoyable, lifting the mood and decreasing stress. Teachers who are less stressed and burned out are more likely to be responsive to children and less likely to use developmentally appropriate teaching methods (Stipek, 2004). Daisy described friendships as being key to work life: “The most positive impact work has had on my life are the friendships I have gained. Some of my closest friends are also my coworkers.” “We stick together, very supportive.” Daisy shared how her colleagues came to her aid when she had to be out for almost six weeks during a family member’s illness. Daisy noted how the teaching staff helped in her absence, which showed a strong evidence of a mutually accepting and respectful faculty and supportive environment:

We had some sort of technology stuff that had to be turned in and another teacher came and helped get it done. And a lot of the things I wasn’t here to do. If she wasn’t able to do it, somebody else stepped in and did it and took care of it and made sure everything got taken care of, kids were taken care of, um even though I couldn’t be here. It wasn’t all things necessarily that the substitute could have done. So, it did require other people. It was other people helping out.

Daisy’s narrative illuminates the complexity of the work that is completed in the classroom each day and how her colleagues were available to help and get things done for the team. The camaraderie among colleagues was a strong indicator of a supportive environment.

Jasmine echoed this sentiment: “Yeah, we stick together, if there’s anything. If someone is going through something, yes, very supportive.” Jasmine reflected on how the faculty supported each other and were generally close. Jasmine described this closeness as essential in her getting her work done.

Sage echoed Jasmine’s thoughts as she reflected on how her colleagues supported her as a teacher and commented on the unity of the faculty too for a team to be supportive for one another:

I can always say I like the people I worked with and that’s a big, big positive. There was not one person on that campus I wouldn’t recommend to someone, you know. The

teachers there were excellent. So, you know that right there is a positive. You know everyone on campus works together and helps each other. There's no tattle-tales or that kind of stuff.

Bonnie had a couple of difficult periods in her personal life, and she described how her colleagues supported her. In speaking about the level of support, she received when her father died and when her husband was recovering from surgery, she recounted:

So, I had people you know... call and check on me, certain people that... just by being here a while we just kind of gravitated and became friends and I think everybody just kind of does that." "I have a friend who calls and says, 'How's your husband? Are you doing OK? Anything I can do for you?"

Bonnie felt support from other faculty members. Her account confirms that there is a sense of camaraderie at this school, an element of the strong foundation that makes this school unique; this camaraderie can be viewed as a support of teacher sensitivity. Similarly, when her father died, Bonnie commented on how her colleagues supported her: "Some of my friends here, you know, they were um, gave me calls and cards and such." In discussing her relationship with her assistant, she commented about the level of support she felt from her, "Cause they [Assistant] have your back." Bonnie's voice denotes a sense intimate behavior among the faculty. They are friendly with each other and consider each other friends outside of the classroom. They support each other.

Rose expressed that being able to talk to colleagues about the experiences in the classroom from the teacher's perspective gave her the ability to continue to use responsive strategies consistent with teacher sensitivity. She also recollected her time as a new teacher at the school and how the other teachers supported her:

I remember my first day. I just went... [to] another who had taught Kindergarten... I went to her room and said, "My God, what have we done! [giggles]. I went to talk to Sage because, I mean, she had been through it! And she goes, 'It's gonna be OK. You do the same thing for two or three weeks and when it gets bad, you just sing and dance and do a finger-play. And that's exactly what worked. Being consistent. Be consistent and ready to change.'"

Rose expressed a level of respect colleagues had for one another, which helped to build their strong network, a place where they could genuinely feel supported and could be open to sharing their vulnerabilities with each other.

Bonnie indicated that camaraderie was a strong support of sensitivity. Bonnie expressed how the faculty had a strong social network outside of the school and how the administration welcomed this collegiality: “Teachers do things with each other and support each other. The administration encourages this activity.” She talked about doing other things to support each other:

We have a little group that meets in the morning in the teacher’s lounge. We have a Courtesy Committee. Different people sign up for different committees. We had a fun committee this year, the Coffee Committee!

The teachers engaged in activities outside of the classroom in support of each other’s personal lives, which was also supported by the administration. Bonnie shared an example of how the faculty is supportive of each other, and this signifies the strong level of camaraderie that existed among the faculty.

Iris described how “They have a prayer group in the morning.” Where teachers can meet in a designated spot to practice their faith. This was explained in her voice about how they could begin their school day in prayer:

We have a little group that meets in the morning in the teacher’s lounge. Just for a little Prayer Time. We have a little time ‘Y’all need anything today?’ ‘Take a moment and remember So and So’s in the hospital’ or ‘Remember this one or remember that one.’

The researcher witnessed such a meeting during a visit to the school:

Six to eight faculty members came together in the teacher’s lounge and a few of the teachers held hands as they prayed. The prayer time occurred as often as the teachers wanted and was welcomed by the administration. (Reference Note #2)

The prayer time substantiates Iris' voice on how the faculty is generally friendly, close, and supportive of each other. Teachers reported that having a sense of camaraderie among faculty made them feel more confident in the ability to work and balance their personal lives, which they revealed led them to having the emotional capacity to be able to respond to children's needs with sincerity and intensity and in a timely manner, all components of sensitive caregiving. The researcher supported this during direct observations and noted:

I saw teachers talking in the breezeway. I saw a teacher who was no longer employed on campus come back to campus and engage in dialogue and hug several teachers and briefly chat with several of them as she was bringing a box of her supplies out of her former classroom. (Reference Note #3)

The teachers were engaged in meaningful and friendly fellowship with each other. This level of camaraderie was reflected in enthusiastic, accepting, and mutually respectful interactions, which are characteristics of responsive and sincere interactions between teachers and children, which is considered teacher sensitivity.

During climate walk #2, it was confirmed that teachers were sharing responsibilities when they needed to in order to build a sense of fellowship. The program promoted positive engagement among all staff members of different positions and staff and faculty members were respectful and positive to children and to one another, and there was evidence that the staff members discussed rules among each other and reminded others of rules. (Reference # 4). Camaraderie among the faculty was substantiated in the teachers' responses during the interviews and focus groups and camaraderie was apparent during the researcher's direct and participant observations of the faculty. The faculty displayed qualities associated with friendship, such as being able to converse with each other and showing a general interest in the welfare of one another (for example, see Figure 10). Faculty connections were discovered from being among them while engaged in climate walks and participant observations, which denoted a

Two teachers, Sage and Iris, in the interviews and focus group thought that the ability to work with faculty contributed to their overall support they received at school. They reported that teachers at this school share materials and ideas with each other, which is the definition of collaboration and a source of informational support. Iris explained that the faculty shares ideas, work on the same pages, talks about bulletin boards, and studies the same things, and making planning easier. Collegial teacher behavior reflects the overall climate affecting teacher sensitivity at this school. Sage described how teachers share materials: “If anyone wants to borrow anything, they know where to go.” She also described how the faculty collaborates in spite of low morale at times. “The faculty itself has got strong ties, even though the morale may be low [at times], people are still like, ‘OK, OK, well how...what did you do and how did you do it?’” This might be considered an informational response. Sage was making it known that they were proud of their school and enjoyed working together.

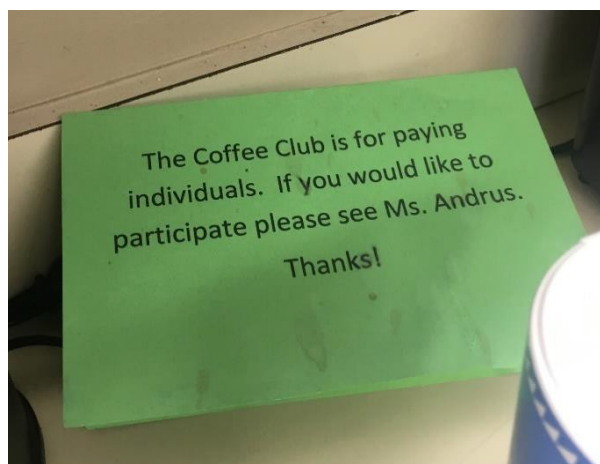


Figure 10. Coffee Club Flyer in Teachers' Lounge. Sign from teacher's lounge about the Coffee Club. This is one club that the faculty created to help increase morale and create a positive environment for faculty. The Coffee Club was evidence of a cohesive and strong network of social support among faculty members.

Iris shared her thoughts on the collegial behavior between teachers and described how the faculty look at teaching as a group effort where they can be supportive (emotional and informational) of each other as opposed to schools where there is not a sense of collaboration and support:

You know some schools the teachers are like, 'That's my idea.' They don't share. I'm not that way, so I expect others to share too cause I'm not gonna take credit for something that wasn't mine. If I use it, I say, 'Oh, Ms. So & So gave me that idea.' But some schools are kind of more reserved like that. But not there. The school is really nice. Cause there is a team to help each other. After all, it's to benefit the kids.

Iris shared that collaboration is a meaningful interaction that is a reflection of team building and is reflective of a strong network among teachers who work well together in the school and who mingle outside of the classroom. Teachers were assigned a mentor during their first year of teaching; that really had an impact on Iris: "Even though she's not my mentor anymore, we still hang out."

Collaboration, as a support for teacher sensitivity, was substantiated by direct observations, during climate walks, and during participant observations on most occasions. Teachers were observed sharing ideas with each other and talking to each other in the breezeway socializing outside of the school (at school-related functions off campus, outside of campus property, and in public settings) and is reflective of Jasmine's representation of the school being a "unique, fun place".

The school is an entire campus dedicated to the education of pre-kindergarten aged children. The uniqueness of a school entirely for a preschool population may be a structural support for teacher sensitivity. Daisy described how being a part of a school where the population was entirely pre-kindergarten children has its advantages for children and faculty:



All the kids are the same age each day. We don't have to worry about being quiet because we're gonna disturb older kids who are testing or studying. So, we can sing and have fun and the fact that here is encouraged. You know, for the kids to be four and not expect them to behave like they're ten.

When faculty are teaching the same aged children, similar experiences will emerge that a tightly connected staff can share and discuss among themselves. Daisy is describing two things here: 1) teachers have common experiences and can share ideas and discuss ways to solve challenges and 2) children have common experiences, and therefore, teachers have similar expectations.

Teachers in this school environment are not being asked to change to accommodate another age group or exposed to other things that require a response from the teachers. Shared experiences add to an increased level of support. The teachers at this school are part of a community that presents more opportunities to collaborate and develop new strategies and techniques to use in the classroom, thereby helping teachers to respond to cues from children in a more attuned manner. The teachers' perceptions of the work environment appear to have a connection to the quality of their work (Feldman, 1999).

What Daisy described was verified during participant and direct observations and climate walks. Teachers were observed to be experiencing the same sequence of curriculum/instruction pertaining to the developmental sequence of curriculum, themes, and events at the school. Documents showed the school was on the same sequence of events, such as the *Behavior Calendar*, *Classroom Notes*, *Calendar of Events*, and the *Development and Learning Objectives* (Documents # 4-7) were analyzed. The children were engaged in the same types of experiences within each classroom. There were twenty-seven classrooms of pre-kindergarten-aged children.

Interviews, focus group discussions, and direct and participant observations confirmed emotional, informational, and instrumental supports for teachers and revealed evidence that shows a variety of factors that support sensitivity relative to the foundations of the school and the

fellowship among its faculty. Teachers discussed essential components of the school that supported sensitivity. These included subscribing to a guiding philosophy, having the administration's support and engaging in camaraderie and collaboration among the faculty. The teachers' voices revealed these factors to be supportive which supports the idea (Jorde-Bloom, 1988; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988) that when teachers are more content in the workplace, which includes their work conditions, they tend to be more committed to their work.

### **Theme Three: Sensitivity Disruptors**

Teachers consistently described several key factors that identified most closely with disrupting their ability to respond to children in a timely and intense manner. These disruptors included school factors such as interruptions, the schedule, and non-teaching tasks; child factors, such as language skills and social-emotional competence; family factors, such as engaging families and parent education; and teacher factors where there was evidence to suggest that occupational stress was a teacher factor that could be a hindrance to teacher sensitivity, and teachers reported using coping factors to handle sensitivity disruptors.

**School factors.** This school was unique in many ways that set it apart from traditional elementary schools; however, teachers described several school factors that affected the quality of their interactions with children that were not uncommon to schools in general. The school factors related to daily interruptions, the schedule, and the requirement to complete non-teaching tasks.

***Interruptions.*** Interruptions were disruptions to the teacher's professional work setting that periodically occurred during the school year and during group time and naptime. Iris described that when the administration makes a change to a policy or procedure, they may not fully anticipate the process of actual implementation and how those policies affect the classroom:

I think they [Administration] mean well, but because of the demands that have been put on us, the new changes... it's kind of hard; maybe they've lost some sensitivity towards us and how that affects us in the classroom.

She explained that the Administration should think about how changes will affect the teachers:

“Before we say ‘Yes’ to this and have the teachers do this... well, ‘How’s that going to affect them?’ Iris described her solutions on how to handle policies and procedures that were going to interrupt the classroom:

Get the kinks out of the first thing before you add something else. I don’t think it’s intentional. But that trickles down and that puts pressure on us even though maybe it wasn’t thought about how it would affect us.

These interruptions included changes to events, and when they were rescheduled, communication was sent out to faculty and parents:

Multiple reminders go out regarding each event, deadlines, and for memos and there were several events that were rescheduled or critical information about events was omitted and the administration had to issue new flyers to communicate changes to families.  
(Reference Note #3)

Teachers indicated that interruptions such as policy changes, announcements during group time, and scheduling meetings during naptime affected their teaching. Iris described the practice of daily, constant unscheduled announcements taking place on the intercom as disrupting what she and the children were engaged in at that moment, making it more difficult to stay on task. These interruptions affected the timing of her interactions and required more effort to refocus children after announcements were completed. Iris explained that the timing of announcements was an un-welcomed interruption to teaching: “You can be right in the middle of something, then there is something on the speaker. That can be an interruption. That can be a negative.” She described her frustration with interruptions and how children got confused when they occurred: “You know like, “I don’t want to hear ‘Scream the Theme’ when I’m in the middle of a story, cause then the children say, ‘Scream what?’”

Interruptions were also reported to occur during naptime. Teachers reported that interruptions affected their ability to record observations, make notes, and reflect, which are necessary in order to evaluate classroom instruction and teacher-child interactions. Iris described naptime as being a time to get things done; however, sometimes the school uses naptime to schedule meetings: “Nap time is nap time; sometimes you’re interrupted because of faculty meetings, or you are on the computer because you are trying to put assessments in.” Since teachers don’t have a set planning time at this school, they used naptime to reflect, refocus, and rethink strategies. Iris expressed how she thought interruptions could be handled: “That, to me, can be [stated] in an email or that can be [stated] at a faculty meeting. Not an announcement thing.” Teachers make use of the time when children nap to record observations, make notes, and reflect on their interactions with children. Interruptions of this nature were reported to disrupt valuable time that teachers would normally spend to reset and regroup themselves and reflect on the quality of interactions that they have had with children.

***Schedule.*** The schedule was mentioned by several teachers as a factor of the environment that influenced the time required to engage in the many components of teaching pre-kindergarten children. Two main factors emerged relating to the schedule: lack of time in general and lack of a set planning period.

Rose described a general lack of time to be an issue: “The main factor is I think that teachers feel like they run out of time. We don’t have time to do everything we are required to do.” In another instance, Iris also commented on the lack of time in the schedule: “Not enough time in the day to get everything done,” and she expressed her thoughts about how the administration did not understand how time was an issue in completing what they were requiring of her: “I think the time factor is one thing that’s easily assumed that when you’re in Admin you

pass down things here, and that time factor is easily misconceived” as she characterized how time is impacted by the schedule: “You don’t think how long it’s actually going to take in the classroom, cause your time is still.”

There was not a set planning period each day at this school. Iris identified this lack of time in the schedule for adequate planning and reflection: “Well, we don’t have a set period every day.” Sage expressed that the lack of a set planning period was a missing part of the schedule. “It would be nice if we had a set designated planning time every day.” The absence of a specific planning period was also identified as a key part of the schedule that affected their teaching. Iris expressed that a teacher has many things to do: “Do all the teaching, do all the lesson planning, but then you also have other things to do.”

Teachers reported that a lack of time and the lack of a set planning period where teachers could devote time to reflect refocus, and rethink strategies affected their teaching. In addition to the schedule, teachers described non-teaching tasks affected their teaching.

***Non-Teaching Tasks.*** Non-teaching tasks are a necessary component of a teacher’s life and are time consuming: “You work on that whenever you can.” The time spent engaging in such tasks like paperwork and computer data entry were described as common non-teaching tasks that take up classroom time that could be used to interact with children. During interviews and the focus group, Iris, Sage, and Rose discussed non-teaching tasks.

Paperwork was reported to be a necessary but frustrating requirement. During the focus group, Rose expressed her frustration with the non-teaching tasks: “Redundant useless paperwork, senseless paperwork. I mean, I love the school and I love teaching, but it’s about the paperwork that’s gotten it.” Paperwork was one aspect of teaching that Iris reported during the focus group as affecting her time with children. Iris described how she did not have enough time

in her day for teaching: “Teachers run out of time to [interact with children] because of paperwork.” She identified some of these non-teaching tasks. “So, you’re on the computer doing assessments or you’re trying to contact parents about kids who are sick and you’re doing the [communication] folders.” There were several factors Iris identified as affecting her ability to respond to children. She reflected on multiple responsibilities such as paperwork, computer assessments, and communicating with parents as factors that shift her focus from noticing and responding to children’s cues. Completing paperwork was reported to affect the time Sage and Iris spent with children and limited the time they had to respond to parents. Sage expressed her feelings about non-teaching tasks. “You know I think they need to knock out some of the paperwork,” and Iris reported that paperwork took her extra time: “Teachers run out of time because of paperwork; extra paperwork was never fun, that’s for sure. It cuts into your time with the students and the parents.” Teachers expressed their frustrations over the amount of time they were required to spend on non-teaching tasks such as paperwork and indicated this was a challenge to teacher sensitivity.

Rose reported non-teaching tasks, such as paperwork and computer data entry, was something she would rather not be doing and instead would like to focus on children: “I’d rather just be teaching and on the floor with them than being worried about ‘I got to go put that in the computer.’” Rose reported that non-teaching tasks such as this were seen as a challenge to sensitivity, and she never felt as if she could catch up:

Sometimes that can be overwhelming. Just trying to keep up with ‘Oh, I’ve done this...wait..., something else?’ You know it’s like, you just can’t... it’s like you’re always treading water. But you know the sensitivity in school... all that extra paperwork and BS does cut into your actual teaching time, your interaction time with students.

Table 16. Examples of Documents as Evidence to Support Teachers Engaging in Non-Teaching Tasks

Document	Description
Behavior log	Shows what skills child excelled in, daily
End of the month reporting form	Reports the demographics, number of children, and if there were any concerns or special services needed, monthly
Field trip forms	Teachers are responsible for planning, four times in school year
No-show document	Teachers complete if a child does not attend, the first week of school
Parent involvement sign-in sheet	Form for teachers to complete to keep track of parental involvement in the classroom, monthly
<i>Teaching Strategies Gold</i> objectives list	List of all the objectives children are required to meet, within the school year
Teaching Strategies update form	Updates to the assessment form
Unexcused absence form	Must be completed each time a child has an absence from school

Communicating with parents was another non-teaching task that was necessary in order to maintain relationships with family; however, other activities, such as paperwork limited the time teachers had to maintain these relationships. Logging children's experiences and behavior was also a required non-teaching tasks; however, teachers were also required to account for many parts of the classroom experience in support of these efforts by completing additional paperwork. Non-teaching tasks were often mentioned by teachers as the reasons they could not focus on children on a much deeper level or respond to children's needs in a timely manner, which would be characteristics of teacher sensitivity (intensity and timing of responses). Iris explained this amount of work that is involved in this process:

Now you have to keep a log [paperwork] when you call them [parents] and when they [children] are absent. Or if you just want to talk to them [parents] about behavior. You have the little folder (Behavior Log) [paperwork] that goes back and forth. It's not the same thing as phone call.

Non-teaching tasks, such as paperwork and computer data entry, communicating with parents, and completing communication folders were identified as challenges to teacher interaction and possible hindrances to sensitivity. Teachers indicated that they spent less time with children when they had to complete tasks. The timing of responses matters in the degree and ability to

which a teacher can respond sensitively. As teachers were engaged in non-teaching tasks, they had less time available to engage in sensitive caregiving. The teachers described these non-teaching tasks as decreasing the amount of time they had to spend with children. Table 18 reflects researcher collected documents as evidence to support the notion that teachers had to engage in tasks that were not directly related to instruction of children.

Table 17. Evidence Collected to Increase Child Development Knowledge and Parent Engagement

Document	Description
Car rider protocol	Document – explains carpool procedures
Classroom newsletter	Document – lists theme and curriculum
Communication folder	Artifact #4 – families are given this each day, initial and return daily
Grandparents day flyer, Grandparents day reminder flyer	Documents – reminders about event
Orientation reminder	Document – reminder of parent orientation
Parent-teacher conference reminders x 3	Document – parent-teacher conference, 1st one
Pennington list	Document – approved snack list
Performance report card	Document – school rating
Portrait reminders	Document – children's pictures
Reindeer games reminder form	Document – physical education activity

**Child Factors.** Pre-kindergarten children presented unique challenges to teacher sensitivity due to their language development and the process of having to help them to develop social-emotional competence.

**Language skills.** Given their age, it is understandable that language skills are developing; however, it was language skills that teachers described as being a factor that affected their ability to be able to accurately meet and timely respond to children's needs. Daisy emphasized how important language skills were in helping children to express their emotions:

You know they can have all the academic skills they need in the world, but if they don't know how to tell somebody or even just to stand up for themselves. Or even just to tell somebody, 'Don't take my toy, I'm playing with it. Ask me for a turn.' A lot of kids that struggle, struggle because they don't have those skills, and they don't have the language to even ask for what they need so that they can be successful in the classroom."



Spending more time with younger children to teach them social skills kept teachers from noticing and responding to the cues given by other children in the group. Daisy described how children are having to learn how to work through their own feelings while being a part of the classroom:

A whole classroom full of other children their same age who want the same things they want, want to do the same things that they want to do at the same time. You know it's ... a lot of them don't come with those kinds of skills. They don't know how to interact with large groups of children their age.

Teachers described language skills as developing and that children were learning to identify their own feelings, to understand why they feel the way they do, and learning how to be able to accurately read and respond to the emotional states of their peers; however, the process of helping children to develop social-emotional competence was complex and was also another factor teachers described as being something they had to help children learn and develop.

***Social-Emotional Competence.*** Along with language skills, teaching social-emotional competence was reported to be a complex factor in the classroom. Daisy described how children enter pre-kindergarten with limited social skills. Teachers have to help multiple children work through social situations simultaneously. The development of social skills is taking place in an interpersonal context, where there is a great emphasis placed on the teacher to help improve children's skills with every interaction. The teacher's desire to help develop this skill was characterized by Daisy as a point of concern: "The biggest issue is the social skills." Rose noted: "You have to give them [children] choices." At this age, teachers must work really close to children to help them learn these skills because they need time to help shape children's expression of emotions. Teachers are responding to children while being attentive to their needs both academic, social, emotional, and developmental while anticipating problems (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Hamre, et. al., 2014, p. 1259). Children this age are really dependent on

the teacher to guide them through social situations which gave added responsibilities to the teacher. Teachers reported that having to help children with social situations presented challenges because they had to be in tune to where each child was in relation to this skill development at all times. Daisy described how she would like to be able to just focus on teaching social skills:

I wish that's all we had to do, was to teach them how to interact appropriately and have those social skills they need to be successful when they get you know into Kindergarten and the rest of elementary school.

She further described that she has to take time to respond sensitively to get children to come together due to their age and lack of emotional regulation: "I have to take more time to say more words to try to get this kid on board. And hope I don't lose the rest of them." The degree to which a teacher responds is a characteristic of teacher sensitivity. While helping one child through a social situation, Iris struggled to respond to the rest of the group at the same time, which was a challenge to the timing responses. Teachers had to spend more time with individual children in an attempt to help them develop social skills, and when a child needed that immediate interpersonal connection, the rest of the group did not get what they needed. Often, this came with a rearranging of physical space and changes to the curriculum. Iris provided a detailed account of an experience and how it made her feel:

You have those days where they're in the back of the room hiding and won't come out. They're under the table. So, what are you doing then? The choices you gave them they don't want. 'Not doing that choice..., not doing that choice....' So, then you have to take time, "OK, Para, you can work with the rest of the group. I really need to get this person out of the corner. You think I'm gonna get my group done that day? Nope. No group. Because why? I'm dealing with that social skill in the back of the room, under the table. I got to get him out first. Because sensitivity means you can't just forget about him. But it kind of means you are kind of forgetting about the other ones, the other nineteen. But that's where your Para comes in. Either the Para has to deal with that one and you're with the nineteen or vice-versa. He can't just be left back there. So, to me, it's frustrating, but yet, I guess it comes with the territory.

A child's developing language skills and social-emotional competence were key parts of the classroom that may have been a challenge to teacher sensitivity. In addition, family factors were also described as presenting challenges to sensitivity.

***Family factors.*** Teachers reported that engaging pre-kindergarten children's families presented unique challenges to teacher sensitivity due to the families' lack of participation in meaningful events and their lack of knowledge about child development. Teachers described both of these factors as affecting the child's behavior in the classroom which put a strain on the teachers' interactions with individual children and the larger group. Parent-child interactions have a major influence on children's social-emotional well-being (Bocknek, Brophy-Herb, & Banerjee, 2009; Cole, 2003, Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Grolnick & Farkas, 2002; Kim & Kochaska, 2012).

***Engaging families.*** Another recurrent factor described by teachers as a challenge to engaging and responding to children was family engagement and family education. Again, this lack of engagement was two-fold as it related to teacher sensitivity. Teachers reported the necessary work that goes into having to get parents involved (calling, writing notes, planning events) took time away from the children and their ability to respond to children in a timely manner. Also, families that were not engaged did not reinforce skills and concepts learned in the classroom, making it more of a challenge to respond sensitively to those children who needed the most guidance; "Sometimes, if you don't have the parent on board, all is lost." Rose identified a lack of family participation and explained that families who really need to be engaged were the ones who rarely showed up at family engagement events. "It was parents [attending] that didn't really need any help with parenting skills. These were the parents that were engaged." She went on to describe the need for families and teachers to work together:

Because some [parents] don't think, 'Oh, I don't need to worry about that. It's just school, or it's just the kiddos, or the teacher will take care of that. When in fact, you need to work together; it's a team effort. A parent at home and a teacher at school and having the conferences, it's important that they come. Some of them [children] really need help.

Teachers reported that the school does many things to try to get the parents engaged. The principal indicated that the school plans many activities for the parents throughout the year.

During the focus group, teachers indicated that the school promotes parent engagement activities, but not all parents take part in the activities at the school. Jasmine described how the climate of the school promoted parent engagement:

It is nice, the families get to come, and we have activities. And I mean it's just a lot of everybody get together, you know, teachers, children, parents, grandparents. It just makes it a family feeling here for everybody.

Direct and participant observation confirmed there were many events hosted by the school to promote parent engagement. Teachers reported wanting parents to be more engaged so that children could get skills reinforced at home which would give them more practice with learning social emotional skills and emotional regulation in the classroom.

Iris described how time spent trying to engage families took time away from engaging with children: "When you're trying to call all your parents, get all your parents involved, it takes longer." This lack of parent engagement was described by most of the teachers as a challenge towards building relationships with families.

Teachers in both interviews and the focus group revealed that time spent trying to engage families was a complex component of their job. Iris described the disconnect between parents and teachers. "Some parents say, 'Now they're [the children] with you [teacher]. You teach them that.' You need to be on the same page. So, there's a disconnect between what I'm trying to do at school and what is done at home. It is more of a challenge." Sensitivity is important and influential in building and merging the influences of both nature and nurture (NICHD, 2003;

Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). Iris also described how important it is to the teacher to have family involvement so that she can be available to children, and therefore, respond to their needs.

As far as like, “How do you feel about that? How would you work on that? How would you work that problem out?” “It’s a partnership. There’s a kind of gap in the partnership. It used to be the parents and the school. Can’t all be the school. You can’t do it all by yourself. You have to have the parents involved.”

Iris described how having to be responsible for both the academic and emotional development without family support was a challenge to developing a partnership with them. Many of the factors that contribute to caregiving sensitivity in parent-child relationships (such as psychological well-being, social support, and so on) are likely to influence teacher sensitivity (Gerber, Whitebook, & Weinstein, 2006), p. 238). Sage also expressed the value of family involvement in the classroom, and she noted that the school tries to get families involved. She described her desire to have parents come into the classroom and participate.

It would be nice if they [parents] would come and observe for a while, but they don’t have time. They are working, and it’s so hard for them. Even at night. We had it [engagement activity]. We tried several times, but it was always the same parents [who attended]. Maybe if we had mandatory meetings... They are so ready for their child to do their best and [it] to be a positive thing you know that they’ll be involved, but the ones that need to be just don’t [come].”

The time spent trying to get parents engaged took time out of the classroom where the teacher could have been responding to children. Rose described how the lack of family engagement affected the amount of time she had in the classroom to work with the whole group in the classroom because when she had to work with an individual child, this indirectly affected the amount of time she had to respond with the larger group:

Cause we are two adults in a classroom of twenty. Whereas, if one person has to deal with one child and one person had to deal with nineteen. You can go through SBLC and all that, but if you don’t have the parent support and they don’t understand what’s going on, you are hitting a brick wall and that is very frustrating. Sometimes, if you don’t have the parent on board, all is lost. You can do so much, and you can control it while it’s there, but it’s an ongoing process. So that is my biggest thing, my biggest challenge.

Family engagement was consistently reported as a challenge to teacher's ability to respond with sincerity, intensity, and the timing of their interactions, although Iris did reflect that, "For the most part, parents want to be involved, but either their work schedule or they are a single parent and don't have the time. I think at least 80% of my parents want to be involved." The lack of family engagement was noted for specific events that required one on one involvement, although there was a robust attempt to get families to the school. This was observed by the researcher and documented in field notes and the climate walk. During participant and direct observations, it was observed that families were given lots of information about ways they could become more engaged in the classroom.

Many events were coordinated and organized by the school so that families could be actively engaged in their children's classrooms and experiences. The researcher attended many school-wide and classroom-specific events and one field trip. Each time, it was noted that there were not many family members who showed up for the specific classroom events. For example, the researcher attended a music class for children where one member of each child's family was invited to participate. Out of twenty children, three family members showed up to be with their children for that event. At another classroom-specific math function, family members were invited to participate, and only three parents out of twenty showed up to participate in that activity. School-wide events had more participation, but this was parent attendance not parent participation in the more intimate settings where they were interacting more personally with their children.

The researcher observed family members in attendance at school-wide events including Family Fun Day, End of Year Graduation, Take Parents to P.E. event, parent-teacher conference, parent meetings, car-pool, after school, in the office, during the Winter Program (Figure 12),

Music with Moms, and a Classroom Math Activity. Most families were attentive during the events they attended, but there were only a few family members that showed up for more personal in-classroom activities. Many parents showed up for larger activities, such as the End of Year Graduation and the Winter Program. Some parents were not engaged at the smaller classroom specific events, such as field trips or in-class activities. Extended family was observed to be in attendance at some events. The principal echoed the sentiments of the teachers:

That a parent's presence is more important than a present. She said that the school has different activities such as Movement with Moms, P.E. with Parents, and she noted that many parents come out. When she sends out parent notifications, she says, 'Make memories. Come make memories with your child! It doesn't always have to be come sit and have dinner with 'em. They can do that any day. Anywhere. Come paint, come get your nails painted. We do these events every month, on average we get 300 parents. Moms, dads, uncles, grandmas, we take anybody.



Figure 11. Family Event Sign. During a climate walk, the researcher observed this parent sign to let parents know where to go for a parent event being held at the school.



Figure 12. Winter Program Gymnasium (Parent engagement). This is evidence of a parent event entitled, Winter Program.

The principal was clearly focused on family engagement and provided weekly family engagement opportunities. The school encouraged not only parents to attend these events but extended family as well (Figure 11). One flyer about a kite flying activity stated: “Your child may invite a dad, step-dad, a grandfather, an uncle, parrain (God-Father), or any other family member.” This evidence shows that the school encouraged parent engagement. Despite the number of events that were offered and there was always a solid group attendance, the researcher collected field notes during participant observation to support some lack of family engagement. The researcher collected and participated in an event called, “Take your parent to P.E.” and collected a flyer as



evidence of another family engagement opportunity put forth by the school. This event was held during the first part of the school year, and there were many family members in attendance. In another instance, the administration held a school-wide parent meeting to explain the results of the school's report card and yearly performance review. Part of the meeting was to explain the process of getting parents to sign-up to become a volunteer so they could become more engaged. Seven parents attended this meeting. A brochure that outlined this process was collected. Parents were given time at the meeting to submit the paperwork to become volunteers so that they could participate in the classroom. The paperwork asked for a copy of the parent's driver's license and asked a series of personal questions. The paperwork was then collected by the administration at the meeting. You could be a Level 1 or a Level 2 volunteer. The difference in the two was the ability to be left alone with children. The researcher signed up to be a Level 1 volunteer and attended a field trip. On the field trip, there were only four children's family members that participated in the event including myself.

The school continuously made attempts to increase family engagement across the entire school population, "You have to have that involvement." This was evidenced by interview responses, administration responses, and researcher observation and documents collected. The researcher also collected family reminders and flyers in Spanish as evidence that the school was supportive of its minority population (Document #8). School telephone recorded messages were sent out to families using both English and Spanish. A Spanish interpreter was at each family event. The researcher collected a document that was handed out to family members to express the importance of play, entitled the "Value of Play" poem (Document #9). The researcher collected multiple reminders that were sent home well in advance of the date of the event. The documents included event-specific information, deadlines, reminders, and memos to support family engagement and education (Documents 10-13). In addition, the school posted signs in the

front of school on its front sign and at the school entrance to remind family members to participate. The researcher noted that the principal would contact families by telephone to remind them of scheduled events. The researcher collected several documents, and this evidence is in Table 20. Family engagement and parent education were parent factors that added to the complexity and challenges of working with pre-kindergarten children.

***Parent Education.*** Teachers expressed that when parents did not understand what skills to reinforce at home, children did not get the extra practice at home using those social-emotional or academic skills, making teacher sensitivity in the classroom a challenge. Bonnie made the connection between lack of engagement and lack of knowledge. “We also give them skills as parents. By us meeting with them, we give them opportunities to come and be engaged in activities with their children’s school.” Bonnie wanted parents to be knowledgeable so that they could help extend the learning at home.

Iris declared that once you can get a parent on board, it is easier to recognize and respond to a child’s cues because skills are being reinforced at home. Iris illustrated what it’s like when she educates families: “Once you start explaining to them from parent conferences, then they start working. But I said, [paraphrasing] ‘If you worked with them at home, you would see that.’ But they don’t see that in the beginning. Iris also reflected this sentiment when she described how she made special assessments just for parents, beyond what the district required just for parents: “We use the TS Gold plus our own teacher-made assessments, ‘cause it’s easier for the parent to understand. It’s more specific.” Iris also shared her frustration with the lack of parental knowledge in a parent’s inability to detect cues about math skills. [Paraphrasing parent] ‘My child can count to ten.’ [teacher] ‘That’s great; he can count, but he doesn’t know what the number three is. He can’t put three blocks in my hand. He can’t find the number three. But he can count to ten.’ That’s completely different!

Iris noted that although parents are proud of their children's transition to pre-kindergarten, with the transition is an assumption by the parents that the child is already bringing all the social skills he/she needs with them to the classroom. Families' lack of education frustrated Iris. Lack of knowledge tended to prevent families from being receptive to learning new skills and practicing new skills at home with their children. Iris reflected on this by noting families' lack of knowledge of child development:

[Paraphrasing] Some parents are like, 'Um, look my baby's starting school. He's only three and he's starting.' But yet he can't carry on a conversation. The social skills are not there. He doesn't want to share, you know.

Teachers reported that they spent time trying to educate parents on child development but that "Education begins at home." The school's motto is placed in the gym for everyone to see (Figure 13). Parents are specifically reminded when they go to the gymnasium that the focus is on their child. Iris explained that parents should be their children's first teacher. Iris wanted parents to understand what children did in the classroom. Sage wanted parents to see the structure at school: "We provide structure and want to show parents how we give them choices."

Documents collected show that teachers provided family education weekly through notes in the form of handouts (Document # 14).



Figure13. School Motto. This motto is posted throughout the school. This is a picture of the motto posted in the gym, home to many student, teacher, and family events.

Handouts were sent home to engage families with children. New skills were spelled out for families and were strongly encouraged to be practiced at home. Rose verbalized how she tries to give families information about little things they can do at home so that they can be more knowledgeable regarding their children's development. "I'm not saying that you drill and drill and drill... I'm trying to show parents how to make games out of even driving down the road." Rose described how families do not realize what their children do not know until the teacher can share information with them. This was her time to educate families about child development:

Cause sometime parents don't know, especially if it's their only child or their first child. They really don't realize, and they don't understand that their child may deviate from the norm, so to speak, or you know they need extra help here, or there, or on something specific. They really don't. They're just not aware of it. So, when you have conferences, you, kind of discuss, you know, and you let them know what is acceptable. But until they're told their kid doesn't know that [concept or skill], that's what you have to teach them.

Teachers explained two reasons why lack of knowledge on child development impacted their teaching. One was that they spent time trying to educate families: "I want them to know I treat your child as my own" when they could have been spending that time interacting with the children. The second reason was that when families did not understand child development, they were less likely to reinforce skills at home, which created challenges in the classroom for the teacher to handle by herself, which took away from instruction time and the time she had to respond sensitively to children. Although necessary, taking time to share knowledge and plan activities to send home to educate parents took away from the teacher's ability to engage in sensitive teaching with the children. Teachers expressed that a parent's lack of knowledge also led to the lack of reinforcement at home of critical social-emotional regulation skills that were being learned at school. In addition to parent factors, there were teacher factors that emerged as being disruptors of sensitivity.

**Teacher factors.** Teachers identified features of the school environment, the classroom environment, and the interpersonal relationships they had with children, which, at times, were sources of stress. They also indicated some of the strategies that they use in order to cope with stressful situations that arose in their workplace.

**Occupational stress.** The stress that comes from working to be sensitive to the needs of all was a common thread among the teachers as they struggled at times to balance their perceived demands (work requirements) versus their perceived capabilities (resources) (Lambert, Kusherman, O'Donnell, MacCarty, 2006). Compassion requires the teacher to purposefully and

intently respond when the time is right, which is at the heart of sensitivity. The school environment believes in supporting developmentally appropriate practices at all times. In support of this, the school's motto is "*Each Day, Each Child, Excellence.*" At times, the teachers reported that they would be affected by the level of demands placed upon them by their work. In both the teacher interviews and the focus group, Iris and Sage reported that their ability to regulate their own emotions was a factor in how they interacted with children, highlighting the challenges of having to be constantly emotionally engaged with children at all times. Iris reported that she must adjust her teaching strategy and emotional energy as the situation requires, which was considered a coping response. In the focus group, Sage made the reference that you have to be ready for anything all of the time:

Try and be prepared for everything. Try and organize yourself. Sometimes, things don't always work out, you know; you try and be prepared the best you can. You know sensitivity is just trying to pick up on what certain children need. Sometimes it's obvious. Sometimes it's not, you know.

Sage described the interpersonal relationships between teachers and children and how a teacher must model caring interactions at all times, being able to accurately read and respond to individual children. These moment to moment responses are critical to sensitive caregiving; however, they place demands on teachers that, at times, can appear to be greater than their perceived resources.

Iris reported that there were times when she did not want to be prepared to respond sensitively at that moment; she just wanted to do her lesson that reflects the compassion fatigue experienced in the classroom. Iris also noted that having to teach children to regulate their own emotions is a skill that can be stressful:

Sometimes, it's stressful doing all the social skills all day. I just want them to listen to my story and not worry about them fighting with this one or that one. 'Why do I have to always redirect?' That can be physically wearing. "Sometimes, you just hit that brick wall just like they're hitting the brick wall.

She also described a possible coping response: “So I need to walk away and let them do what they need to do and come back and try again.” Iris expressed her realization that this was just a day in her work life, part of her job:

I am “on” all the time. I just want to teach the lesson. I sometimes don’t want to deal with the social part. But at this age, that’s a major part of it. You kind of have to. Maybe it’s because I taught older ones. But you kind of have to bring that down. If you love teaching, you love teaching. You can be right in the middle of a story and then somebody’s sick, somebody hits me, there’s an interruption.”

Iris’ account of her experience shows how teachers are human, and sometimes, they get weary of having to respond to children’s needs each day, all day, and with each child. At times, teachers can become disengaged, and this is something that Iris illustrated in her narrative.

Daisy characterized how sometimes she gets stressed when she is going through an observation. She also expressed that she gets tired and cannot handle the emotional toll it takes on her to be consistently responsive and engaged with twenty children for seven to eight hours per day:

I love teaching there, and I love working with the teachers there. And I love working with the kids there, but some days you just feel exhausted to keep up with everything. When you have someone coming in, an outsider coming in. Maybe they caught a bad day, so you don’t get a good rating. ‘So, you’re gonna base my one day, of all my years’ experience on one day?’ The negative impact work has had on my life is job-related stress. There is a lot of stress resulting from working with young children and their families. I love working with children and feel we need more support to help deal with the growing number of students with special emotional, family, and developmental issues.

Daisy’s voice illustrated that a teacher can strive to do her best each day; however, it is emotionally draining at the same time to be your best all day, every day given all they are required to do and the fact that they are watched and evaluated on how they interact with children.

Teachers need to have coping strategies to handle workplace stress. Daisy described how faculty “Try to increase morale by supporting one another and getting together outside of school

to de-stress and relax” as a way to cope with workplace demands that result in occupational stress, and “As colleagues, we celebrate and recognize our coworkers’ achievements as often as we can.” Teachers indicated that having to always be emotionally available and respond in the manner, which was required for each child, each day, was a source of stress, but they were resilient. Daisy expressed that “Everybody, regardless of what’s going on, is happy to work with these kids and with each other.” The teachers identified some additional coping responses, such as adjusting teaching strategies, increasing emotional energy, being prepared to adapt, and taking breaks as the situation required as ways to cope with stressful working conditions.

A primary area of inquiry for the present project was to uncover what teachers believe helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive teachers. A systematic review of the data uncovered three central themes and ten sub-themes (Table 1). Theme one emerged as strategies that enhance/encourage teacher sensitivity, such as *Being a Good Listener*, *Encouraging Empathy*, *Promoting Socioemotional Literacy Skills*, and *Observing Behavior*, and they were reflective of the characteristics of sensitivity (sincerity, intensity of response, and timing of responses). In connection to the second theme, *Supports for Sensitivity*, there were emotional, instrumental, and informational supports that were identified and the following sub-themes emerged *Foundations and Fellowship*. Finally, theme three emerged as *Sensitivity Disruptors*. Pertaining to this theme, the following sub-themes emerged *School Factors*, *Child Factors*, *Family Factors*, and *Teacher Factors*. This previous section summarized and presented the three major themes and sub-themes of the present research study that explored the concept of teacher sensitivity from the teachers’ voices within a Pre-Kindergarten elementary school. The next section will be a discussion of the evaluation and interpretation of the results, a drawing of inferences, and conclusions.



## **CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore teacher sensitivity from the perspective of teachers in order to use their voices to understand how they describe their journey to becoming sensitive and what helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as it relates to the literature on teacher sensitivity. Also included is a discussion on the connections to this study with organizational climate. This project does not seek to explore whether or not a teacher is sensitive, but rather give voice to teachers as they describe teacher sensitivity and what factors help or hinder their ability to be sensitive in their work as teachers. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a brief summary. The chapter contains dialogue regarding next steps and future research possibilities to help answer the research areas of inquiry:

1. How does a teacher describe his/her journey to becoming sensitive?
2. What do teachers say helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive?

### **Findings**

My initial goal was to understand how teacher come to know their role as sensitive teachers. Under the pretext of my first research question, I envisioned prior to the project that the teachers would present individual and personal narratives as to how they became a sensitive teacher. I anticipated that the teachers would recount experiences from their childhood or formal adult training about how these experiences shaped who they were as a caregiver. I envisioned that they would recount a significant adult in their lives who had influences over the way they interrelate with people, similar to my own experiences as a teacher.

However, this was not the case. Teachers were not interested in recounting their life experiences but preferred to share how they began working at the school and described the

reasons why they are able or unable to display qualities that reflect sensitivity, which in many ways illuminates the second research question: What do teachers say helps/hinders their ability to be sensitive? Through their responses, I discovered there were many factors that are related to teacher sensitivity. This is one of the complexities of the concept of teacher sensitivity; it is a multi-dimensional, non-linear concept.

The answers to the first research question are surprising. There is no difference revealed in the descriptions of sensitivity in relation to their early influences on teaching. Teachers were interested in talking about how they came to work at the school or how they became a teacher and discussed their teaching background. Instead, teachers share how their perception of the environment really shapes how they are able to engage in the specific characteristics of teacher sensitivity (responding in a sincere, intense, and timely manner). They reveal how much of their own strategies, the administration's support, and their connections to the faculty are essential in giving them the emotional strength to do their jobs well. They all remain committed to the school and the children, despite the challenges. The teachers also describe that the qualities that define sensitivity not only apply to teacher-child interactions, but that sensitivity is about the interactions among teachers, administrators, children, parents, and ultimately their own perceptions of the environment. Although the first question is not answered in the way initially intended, the answers to the second questions illuminate the multi-dimensional influences on teacher sensitivity from the teachers' voices, which situates the teacher and the relationships that he/she has with others in the environment at the center of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977).

Sensitivity begins when they embark on the journey of becoming a teacher and is a part of who they are as teachers, as the two characteristics do not seem inseparable. In addition, they

highlight reasons from a teacher's perspective, which sensitivity encompasses more than teacher-child interactions. The teacher to child interactions, child-to-child interactions, teacher-to-teacher interactions, teacher to administrator interactions, and teacher to parent interactions defines it, which is at the heart of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977).

This study's conclusion refers to the influences of teacher sensitivity as reported by the teachers in this school. They identify the strategies they use to enhance their ability to respond to children in a more sincere, intense, and timely manner, which are characteristics of sensitivity. These teachers describe supports and disruptors of these characteristics of teacher sensitivity, including factors associated with the school, children, families, and themselves. These are comprised of three themes: (a) *strategies that enhance/encourage sensitivity* which include being good listeners, encouraging empathy, promoting socioemotional literacy skills, and observing behavior, (b) *supports for sensitivity* include emotional, instrumental, and informational supports. These include the adaptation of a school-wide guided framework to which teachers engage and commit to, an administration who is supportive of teacher's personal and professional lives, and colleagues who have a strong sense of fellowship; and (c) *sensitivity disruptors*, which include factors about the school, children, families, and teachers which teachers describe as being disruptive to their ability to respond to cues from children in a sincere, intense, and timely manner. These themes relate to historical literature on these topics. Teacher strategies, program philosophy, administrative support, and child, parent, and teacher factors each contribute to teacher sensitivity according to the voices of the teachers in this study. The significant results here are that sensitivity is a complex and fluid concept affected by many environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors and is difficult to explain from a non-linear perspective. There are interwoven factors that overlap and affect each other, and teacher sensitivity is

expressed to a degree because of these considerations. Given the complexity of this concept, teacher sensitivity must be explored from alternative perspectives than what has historically been done in the past.

According to these teachers, they are sensitive by nature of being teachers and the process of becoming a teacher. However, the degree to which they exhibit this quality depends on the professional climate to which they belong and the quality of the moment-to-moment interactions they encounter with children and other professionals during the course of their day in their environment. This study's results highlight the complex set of factors that are present on many levels influencing teachers' responses to children. These results are relevant because they provide further support of the importance of implementing best practices in the school environment. These findings are in line with literature that supports the need for early childhood teachers to be sensitive when interacting with young children (Wilcox-Herzog, & Ward, 2004) and the notion that sensitive caregiving is related to positive child outcomes for both children and classrooms (Howes & Smith, 1995). Teachers are influenced by multiple forces, and these results are characteristic of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical perspective on systems that enhance a person's development.

### **Responding Sensitive: Four Specific Strategies**

Teachers identify that they engage in specific strategies in the classroom to connect with children and understand them on a deeper level, and they report that these strategies increase their awareness to detect children's cues. These strategies include being a good listener, encouraging empathy, promoting socioemotional literacy skills, and observing their behavior. This finding is consistent with Benner and Graham (2009) who found that a teacher's characteristics and behaviors might influence children's behavior. Teachers use specific

strategies to help them understand children and to tailor their responses to them in a more efficient manner.

***Being a good listener.*** The strategy of being a good listener is consistent with the results reported by Hamre et al. (2014) who describe highly sensitive teachers as showing more communication and socialization skills. When teachers can listen to children, they are building a classroom culture that displays respect and consideration for its members. This skill also helps the teacher to be able to respond more sincerely after he/she has taken the time to really understand what a child is communicating. The teacher can engage in conversations that are more open-ended, thereby increasing children's language and socioemotional literacy skills. The sincerity, by which a teacher interacts with children, would be characteristic of sensitivity. This skill is shaped by forces that undermine its full development. The teacher's ability to be a good listener is usually challenged in a large group of children. This finding is consistent with other studies on listening. "Curricula and assessments, the mechanics of the classroom teaching, behavior management, and the demands of inspections limits what can be heard" (Gallagher, Prior, Needham, & Holmes, 2017, p. 1248). The concept of being a good listener as it relates to teacher qualities and how they connect to teacher sensitivity is an area for future research.

***Encouraging empathy.*** This is a strategy that they use to help children develop emotional competence. This finding is in line with literature that finds that sensitive teachers are warm and attentive to children while responding to them in a manner that acknowledges their emotions, meets their academic, emotional, and developmental needs, and anticipates problems, which are qualities of a sensitive teacher (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997).

***Promoting Socioemotional Literacy Skills.*** Promoting socioemotional literacy skills while interacting with children is a strategy that teachers reported helps them to assist children to

recognize and identify their feelings and the needs of others. This finding is consistent with the previous work of La Paro, et al. (2004) who describes sensitive teachers as positively responding to children in a manner that helps with overall children's learning. This finding also supports previous work done by Bowlby (1973) who found that teachers engage in back and forth exchanges that help them with the construction of knowledge. In addition, this type of back and forth exchange process has been described by Hamre et al. (2014) as sending a message of "consistent expectations". This study also supports a previous finding that teachers who are highly sensitive are also often more likely to engage in effective language-stimulation practices (Hamre, et al. 2014, p.1257). Promoting socioemotional literacy is a strategy that is consistent with the NICHD study (2002) that found that when teachers use language in a thoughtful way, they are able to respond to cues from a child by acknowledging what a child needs and help them with constructing their world. It would be interesting to further study the effects of promoting socioemotional literacy as it specifically relates to the overall quality of the teacher's responses to children as they relate to the qualities of sensitive caregiving and the building of trusting relationships.

***Observing Behavior.*** Observing behavior is a critical function of a teacher's job, which occurs throughout the school day and is a part of the school culture. Setting overall expectations and sharing a program philosophy and vision are described as "crucial functions" (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). Teachers emphasize that there were bridges that help them to practice sensitive caregiving more purposefully. This includes observing children's behavior throughout the day, which was something these teachers are doing because of following developmentally appropriate practices and meaningful and purposeful professional development. This result supports Bloom's (2010) findings that suggest that having common educational objectives will make it easier to reach

compromises and reflect the ability of the employees to tolerate differences and engage in teamwork. Bloom (2010) identifies this as “goal consensus.” Implemented by the larger school district, the use of the book “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015) was a purposeful, professional development. This book represented the emotional, informational, and instrumental supports teachers identified as supporting their interactions with children. Teachers are using the strategies in this book to help them focus their teaching practices and improve children’s social-emotional competence, which include observing children so that they can detect cues more accurately and be equipped with knowing how to address their cues with more accuracy.

These strategies are part of a larger system of professional development where skills and strategies can be practiced in the classroom. An aspect of the environment, that includes the adaptation of a guiding philosophy, is part of a larger framework instituted by the school district. This framework includes the characteristics of a sensitive teacher: (sincerity, intensity of response, and the timing of interactions) in its suggested strategies of practice. All of the teachers at this school are using “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015), and this may be reflective of what many (Rimm-Kaufman, et. al. 2003; Greenberg, et al. 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Morrison & Connor, 2002; Pianta, 2006; Rutter & Maughan, 2002) call a larger relationship system of higher quality, which is centered around interactions between children and adults which influences instructional practices that lead to positive developmental outcomes. This is consistent with Manlove, et al. (2007) who found that a supportive environment might be an important factor in determining what happens for children. This finding is also similar to the finding from Zinsser et al. (2016b) that found that policies at the school-level affect classroom practices and can have an impact on child outcomes. This finding is consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) which describes the different aspects of the environment affecting individual

development. The administration's implementation of a shared philosophy and the teachers' practice of these strategies support previous findings from Jorde-Bloom (2015) that principals and early childhood leaders influence school goals, practices, policies, and socialization practices. In addition, children's development and learning are supported by a culture of high expectations, shared values, and common beliefs (Bloom, Hentschel, & Bella, 2013; Bloom, 2014).

### **Supports of Teacher Sensitivity: Administration and Faculty**

***Administration.*** Adult experiences of the environment, including how supportive it is, is been reported to be an important factor in determining what happens in the classroom (Manlove et al. (2007). Teachers refer to the administration and their support in balancing their personal lives with their work schedule. The results of this support agree with previous literature (Rohacek, Adams, & Kisker (2010) and Howes, James, & Ritchie (2002) which finds that administrative support is an important predictor of teachers' positive attitudes about their work environment. This study's findings support Jorde-Bloom's (2015) conclusions that principals and early childhood program leaders influence school goals, practices, and policies, as well as socialization.

The teachers refer to an administration that is supportive with respect to teachers' personal lives and ensuring that they are able to achieve balance in meeting their personal demands outside of work. The teachers report that having administrative support both inside and outside of the classroom create a work environment where they want to work and can feel confident that they can navigate their personal and professional lives successfully. Jorde-Bloom (2015) describes the administration of a high-quality environment as an organizational asset. The results of this study are also in agreement with NAEYC (2009) standards based on research, that



report that having a leadership and management team who promote a climate of learning and support should be a pillar of a quality program for children. These results also support the findings of Jorde-Bloom (2015) that suggest that leadership relates to helping the organization clarify and live its values and helps to define and achieve goals. The findings from this study are consistent with previous studies, which suggest that a teacher can interact with children in a developmentally appropriate manner when they are working in a more supportive work climate (Kim et al. 2009; Lower & Cassidy, 2007). The adult experiences reported here as they relate to teacher sensitivity are related to several interrelated factors, consistent with an ecological systems model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

***School Setting.*** This study concluded that there are environmental factors unique to this school setting affecting the characteristics that define teacher sensitivity. The school setting focused on pre-kindergarten children. This school setting helps to create an environment where teachers could support each other. This environment, although not unique, is in stark contrast to other public elementary schools in the region, where pre-kindergarten teachers are among other grade levels but isolated from the rest of the age groups in terms of the developmental ages of the children, their curriculum content, and practice. Curriculum is a factor that shapes overall ease of teaching. Practicing the same themes in the same sequence of curriculum helps teachers to share ideas and work together in real time to support each other with little feelings of competition and competitiveness. The teachers are experiencing similar events, successes, and challenges, which may further strengthen their relationships with each other. This further strengthens their support for each other personally and their support of colleagues' endeavors both in and out of the classroom. The qualities that make up this environment are important for understanding early childhood programs successes and challenges. Further research should examine how this type of

school environment supports teachers' loyalty and commitment to the school itself given the fact that early childhood teacher turnover in this state is above 40%.

***Camaraderie and Collaboration.*** Camaraderie and collaboration are two characteristics of the faculty that they report as influencing their ability to stay emotionally resilient and professionally committed to their workplace. In addition, each currently employed teacher interviewed in this study has a shared sense of belief in the guiding philosophy that was being implemented with the "*Conscious Discipline*" book (Bailey, 2015). Camaraderie and collegiality amongst the faculty is reported to buffer against other environmental and situational challenges that affect their responsivity to children. This is an important finding, since this shared vision is an instrumental support and helps teachers feel like they have a sense of unity in their work experiences.

The ability to share ideas and strategies, to assist each other both emotionally and instructionally, and form intimate relationships with fellow faculty members seemed to allow teachers the emotional and instructional support they needed to remain committed to their work. Camaraderie and collaboration are two characteristics of the faculty that they report as influencing their interactions with children, which is consistent with previous literature (Bloom, Hentschel & Bella (2013) and Bloom (2014) that underscores the importance of children's development and learning being best supported in a culture of high expectations, shared values, and common beliefs. Teachers support each other both in competing administrative tasks on campus and when teachers need personal support for situations that arise outside the school environment. In essence, teachers report that other teachers offer emotional support and informational guidance to each other. These types of supports are a teacher's source of workplace strength, which gives them encouragement in the classroom, helps them to remain in

their positions and helps them to display the qualities of a sensitive teacher during their interactions with children. This finding supports the work of Jorde-Bloom (1988), Kontos, and Stremmel (1988) who discovered that when teachers are more content in the workplace, which includes work conditions, they tend to be more committed to their profession. The teachers who participated in this study are all long term, dedicated faculty members. This fact can further underscore the importance of their voices, as they are reflective of what strategies and supports work and which are not supportive of teacher sensitivity. Teachers take on the role of mentors, confidantes, and friends among each other. This finding is similar to work done by Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz (2018) who found that collegiality is one of the strongest and most positively reported components of organizational climate. This would be consistent with Hoy and Tarter's (1992) finding about the internal characteristics of the environment that distinguish schools from one another and influence the behavior of its members (p.74). This finding is consistent with Ekholm and Hedin's (1987) findings that when teachers exhibit more teamwork, they are more active in planning and interacting with children during play while being flexible to their needs, a key characteristic of sensitivity.

Interpersonal characteristics of the environment and have been attributed to the quality of the workplace climate in coworker relationships (Bloom, 1988; Karoly, Zellman, & Perlman, 2013; Zinsser, & Perlman, 2013; Zinsser et al. 2016a). As Zinsser et al. (2016a) notes, the way a teacher perceives the environment where he/she works may affect his/her emotions in the classroom and his/her social-emotional teaching practices. This study refers to camaraderie and collaboration as being characteristic of the supports that teachers described exist within their workplace and further serve to strengthen their relationships with children. In addition, this is reported to be a factor in the teachers' overall workplace satisfaction. The climate of this school

is welcoming and supportive, which contributes to teachers' positive interactions with children and their feelings that the environment is a supportive component of their work, which was in line with the existing literature. Gerber et al. (2007) suggests that the setting and conditions of the childcare, itself, may contribute to teaching behaviors.

### **Sensitivity Disruptors: School, Children, Families, and Teachers**

While teachers express factors of the school environment that support the quality of their responses to children, teachers reference aspects of this school, characteristics of children and families, and teacher factors related to workplace stress which disrupt the process in which they engage with children and the degree (intensity) to which they respond to children. A term selected by the researcher, "disruptors" are things that teachers do not identify by name, but nevertheless, they recognize that these factors exist. This may be an indication that the teachers are in fact sensitive, since they are able to identify that these factors that interrupt the sincerity, intensity, and timing of responding to children's cues, key characteristics of sensitivity. The teachers emphasize that certain school circumstances, in particular, spontaneous daily interruptions, the school schedule's lack of time for teacher planning, and the necessary requirement of completing many non-teaching tasks, are hindrances to teacher sensitivity because each factor disrupts the sincerity, intensity, and timing of teachers' interactions with children, which are key characteristics of teacher sensitivity.

***Interruptions.*** In connection to school circumstances, one new finding emerges among the results of this study. What has not been previously examined or explored is the frequent, unannounced, and unscheduled daily classroom interruptions, which occur throughout the day. Teachers describe these as taking themselves and children off task, which requires extra time and advanced teacher strategies to re-engage the group once the interruptions are over. Happening

several times during the day, interruptions are usually over a loudspeaker or intercom for all to hear in the classroom. It is reported that children pay attention to these announcements and try to make sense of them, which takes away their focus on instruction and takes them off task, especially when the teacher has their attention in a group setting. These disruptions are reported to cause the teacher to have to readjust the ways in which she refocuses children and affects the quality of her response time and intensity of her engagement with children. In addition, with several interruptions reported to occur throughout the course of the day, these interruptions are described as taking away the amount of time teachers have to respond effectively. After review of literature, this specific occurrence has not been previously explored in relation to the quality of teachers' responses to children and is thus a new finding in this respect. One possible reason for this lack of specific interruption being overlooked in literature as affecting teacher sensitivity is that unscheduled announcements are seen as a commonplace practice within schools and may be so normalized and frequent in nature that it has not been viewed as a problem but just a part of school life. With more pre-kindergarten children entering the school systems under the public-school umbrella, this will be an important factor to consider going forward, and teachers must be trained on effective strategies to regain the group and maintain composure in light of school place functions. As noted here, teachers need time to understand how to effectively meet children's needs in a manner that anticipates problems and what children need before they verbally require assistance (Rimm-Kaufman, et. al., (2003). Future research may examine this common practice in schools and how it affects the teachers' interactions with children as more children are introduced into the school setting.

***Schedule.*** Teachers reported multiple program and organizational challenges, which decreases the time they have available for reflection on teaching practices and planning

meaningful experiences for individual children. Teachers in this study consistently report that learning to manage time within these constraints is something that they knew how to do; however, the lack of time for adequate reflection and planning in the schedule was described as being a strain on their teaching, factors that could be a hindrance to sensitivity. Time has been shown to be a factor in completion of tasks and the overall efficiency of an organization which Bloom (2010) identifies as “task orientation”. The emphasis on time constraints within the schedule is concluded to be a major factor that teachers describe as affecting their response time with children.

***Non-Teaching Tasks.*** Another component of teacher life is the amount of extra work that is involved in addition to teaching. This is reported to affect the quality of interactions with children. However, as is common in most early childhood settings, the administration relies on teachers to complete additional work tasks that are unrelated to the direct care of the children, but necessary to their work, because of the accountability efforts that must be communicated to parents, districts, and lawmakers. Teachers report that the time that this extra work takes away from their interactions with children affects the quality of their responses. The added responsibilities put a strain on teachers’ workday and interfere with the constant teaching of social skills to children and assisting with their development of emotional regulation that is necessary and expected in a high-quality learning environment. This study’s results on the many tasks a teacher must engage in are in line with existing literature. Hamre et al., (2004) found that teachers divide their time between paperwork, classroom maintenance, and children who need extra attention due to either behavioral or social/emotional issues. In addition, these results support Lower and Cassidy’s (2007) findings that there is a positive relationship between the quality of management practices and the quality of learning environments.

One requirement for “intent of response” is to offer comfort with the hopes of solving issues and helping children construct knowledge with each interaction and sends a message of consistent expectations to children (Hamre et al. 2014). These results confirm Hamre et al.’s (2014) assertion that teachers divide their time between paperwork, classroom maintenance, and children who need extra attention due to either behavioral or social/emotional issues. This leaves the teacher in a position that requires her to organize and prepare for activities, manage her time and attention between other tasks, while attempting to attend to children effectively.

***Children.*** Teachers reported an awareness of children’s age and social-emotional skill influencing their ability to respond sensitively and reflects some of the challenges of working with this age group and in this school environment. This finding also supports La Paro, Pianta, Stulman’s (2004) notion that sensitive teachers are aware of the simple and complex individual needs of children and can positively respond in a manner that helps with their overall learning. Teachers describe that the age at which children are allowed to enter the school (three years old), makes them more likely to enter into a group setting with a lack of social-emotional skills, which places an important undertaking upon teachers to assist children with the development of these skills while in their care, in turn impacting teachers’ degree of response to them.

Pre-Kindergarten children are learning to regulate their emotions. At any point in the school day, teachers report that they will have to deal with abrupt emotional outbursts and disturbances that are part of the Pre-Kindergarten classroom. Teachers cite that they are modeling social skills and helping children regulate their emotions throughout the school day. This is consistent with the findings that teachers must have a positive regard for children and respond to them in a way that is appropriate given the context of what the child needs and is reacting to at any given moment (Rimm-Kaufman, et. al., 2003). A teacher must adjust his/her

teaching strategy and emotional energy, as the situation requires, which the essence of contingent is responding, a quality of teacher sensitivity. This supports La Paro, et al.'s (2004) notion that teacher sensitivity is the ability to become aware of the individual needs of children, from the simple to the complex needs and being able to respond to them in a positive manner.

In addition, children experience frequent bouts of negative reactions and intense emotional moments. These require the teacher to refocus on the child or children who require the immediate assistance and while also managing the collective group who may be vicariously affected by the incident. This has to be done all while remaining in complete control with calm, cool, and collected composure, which takes skill. The skill of composure is highlighted in the book, "*Conscious Discipline*" (Bailey, 2015) which has been adopted by the school and the district to help teachers build resilient classrooms. One of the ways this school highlights sensitivity is the use of the philosophical framework and strategies from the book. The ability to respond to children's cues is reflective of a consistently warm and positive teacher (Buhs, et. al. 2015, p.13). This finding supports the notion put forth by Gerber et al. (2007) that training, and classroom quality is key in explaining how teachers can remain sensitive in spite of these challenges to the overall climate of the classroom and its impact on teacher sensitivity. This finding is in line with literature that suggests that pre-service training and professional development programs for early childhood teachers must target key components of emotional support, which include providing a classroom where children know what to expect and being able to provide support for children who may need greater attention, so they feel more secure with the teacher and their environment, and are able to attend to learning tasks (Curby, et. al., 2013). This finding, which although is not new, is something to be aware of as we train teachers and continue to provide professional development to those who teach this age group.



***Families.*** Families present unique challenges when it comes to how teachers are able to interact with individual children. The teachers reveal that family involvement, participation, and engagement in the classroom are essential to their interactions with children. Teachers refer to the important role that parents have in the classroom experience in relation to the teachers' ability to respond to children. The results of this study agree with the literature regarding family involvement. Parent-child relationships (such as psychological well-being, social support) are likely to influence teacher sensitivity (Gerber, et. al., 2006, p. 328). This study concludes that having a lack of family engagement, makes the teachers' ability to recognize children's cues and accurately respond to their needs more of a challenge because the teachers do not have the parents to reinforce critical social-emotional skills at home. The importance of family engagement is in line with the literature that discusses how children achieve more, demonstrate an increased awareness of motivation, and exhibit higher levels of social, emotional, and behavioral development (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Reynolds, 1991).

There are many opportunities that have been created to give parents the opportunity for participation at the school; however, the teachers in this project describe the specific classroom activities and events had lower than anticipated participation than school-wide participation events, such as the Winter Program, Fun Day, and Graduation.

While literature identifies the importance of family engagement and participation, it is interesting to note the distinction and its impact for the teachers in this study, which may be a unique finding as it relates to this environment. Teachers describe parent engagement having different degrees of quality. In high-quality parent engagement, there is an expectation that families are required to be involved and actually engage in interpersonal interactions and participation in the classroom. In low-quality parent engagement, which was the type that most

of the teachers interviewed revealed occurs, families are required to only attend, only their presence is required, and minimal participation is expected. Although mere presence is better than no engagement, there are important differences. Through engagement, families not only are present at events but also actively participate in the classroom academic and social process (communicating with the teacher, volunteering in the classroom, assisting with the development of skills). In addition, through engagement, teachers report that there are the opportunities for families to observe teachers helping children practice social-emotional competence skills in the classroom and can see the modeling of adult-child interactions. This is in line with existing literature about how participation in school provides parents insight into their children's abilities and creates an opportunity for parents to promote the development of their children's school-related abilities at home (Powell, 1982).

Active engagement may increase the likelihood that a parent may be willing to try using the new skills at home where there is more opportunities for practice. Actively engaging in a child's classroom may strengthen a parent's appreciation for the work that the teacher is doing in the classroom and may motivate the teacher to continue to engage the parent. This study is consistent with the literature of several researchers (Kohy, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman, et. al., 2005; Vickers & Minke, 1995) that there is a distinct difference between parent involvement behaviors and the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, making this finding consistent with literature and important for future discussion on parent engagement and its impact on the teacher-child relationship.

Teachers describe their appreciation for their role in engaging parents and take pride in their ability to work towards getting parents to be a better first teacher and to help parents develop a positive relationship with the school in their quest to understand the children better.

Teachers encourage parental attendance and participation in school events and emphasize their role in assisting the parents in overcoming their own fears and biases shaped by their experiences as a student. In essence, these teachers in this study report that they are tasked with forming the foundation of what a parent/school relationship really looks like for parents of pre-kindergarten children, especially first-time parents. As is expected from a high-quality early childhood environment, teachers report spending a considerable amount of energy engaging parents in the learning process. However, teachers express frustration with the lack of parental engagement from parents who have children who could benefit the most from parental engagement. The lack of parental engagement may be explained by other factors related to socioeconomic, demographical, and geographical factors that are not examined in this study. Nevertheless, teachers report that they remain hopeful to be able to change the amount of parental engagement with the use of “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015). This idea is supportive of current research done in schools implementing “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015) as parents previously surveyed view the school climate positively. Research shows that parents in schools implementing “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015) view the school climate positively and demonstrate the strength of using this approach school-wide (Rain, 2014). It would be interesting to examine the types of parenting strategies used at home with those families who attend schools using this guidebook. Using the book “*Conscious Discipline*” (Bailey, 2015) attempts to model how to regulate emotions for teachers who then must take that knowledge and apply it to helping children regulate their emotions. A person’s ability to process behavior on a complex level, while trying to understand the sources of their behavior is clearly reinforced by using this book and is supported by Manlove et al. (2008) who labels this concept as being a “perspective thinker.” Teachers have an appreciation for their ability to engage parents; however, the number of parents

who actively participated in parent engagement activities was reported to be low, especially among the families who had children who could benefit the most from such activities.

In addition to family engagement, the teachers in this study report that families did not have basic understanding of early child development. Teachers report that this lack of knowledge makes it difficult for families to reinforce concepts and extend learning at home, in terms of both academic and social-emotional skills, which has implications for the classroom. Teachers report that it is more of a challenge to recognize children's cues in the classroom, which may be because children do not have additional opportunities to practice these particular skills at home. The results of this study agree with previous literature that suggests that teachers must not only teach children, but are providing their parents exposure to critical early childhood education in a wide range of skills that not only impact the children's development in the classroom, but also increase parent knowledge and skills on these topics (Pakulak et al. 2017). Teachers provide classroom learning extension to parents, which is a feature of a high-quality early childhood program (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The results of this finding agree with literature regarding the nature of a reciprocal relationship with families and the positive impact this has on children's academic and social-emotional development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). However, teachers report that this task requires a considerable amount of planning and effort on their part, which takes away time they have to spend on interacting with children. What has not been frequently studied is how the lack of families' awareness of early childhood education affects teachers from the standpoint of their ability to respond sensitively to them. This study's conclusion refers to the fact that it is evident that high quality programs must continue to increase not only family engagement; but also find ways to increase family knowledge in early childhood education to further reinforce academic and social-emotional skills at home, which will affect the teacher-

child relationship in the classroom. This may come from introducing more core early childhood concepts earlier, before a child enters pre-kindergarten. This education could come from the medical and social service fields, as well as community-wide events.

***Teachers.*** Lastly, on the subject of sensitivity disruptors, several teachers cite that there is a great amount of emotional energy required to engage in sensitive interactions for long periods of time, which leads to workplace stress. This emotional energy spent is reported to affect the quality of their interactions with children. Although there is no way to ensure that a teacher can be taught how to be a sensitive teacher, a teacher can be shown strategies that can be used to engage with children, which may have an impact on their relationships with them. Emotions may be predictive of teacher behavior and instructional practices in the classroom. This study refers to the administration's attempts to: (1) implement new policies and practices as they see best in order to provide the highest quality experience in a safe and supportive learning environment for children and (2) create and maintain a supportive environment that is optimal for teachers. This also confirms findings that administrators play a key role in identifying problems in the school and providing the necessary interventions needed to make changes (Bloom, et. al. 2010). These efforts, which reflect a quality early childhood program, are reported to add to feelings of stress to the teachers in this study when they have to continuously adapt to new ways of doing things and implement the changes made in light of their already stressful work with pre-kindergarten children. The teacher is constantly checking his/her own emotions in order to get children to remain in an emotionally healthy safe space and to continue to focus the entire group on the goals and objectives for the day which includes responding to potential problems, fulfilling emotional needs, recognizing emotions, and providing comfort, assistance, and support (Pianta et al. 2008). The long periods of time where teachers have to be emotionally available highlight

conditions that place the teachers at an increased risk of developing stress and burnout and may affect the quality of their responses to children. This connection would be an interesting line of future study since it is consistent with existing literature on the impacts of stress and burnout in early childhood education. There are previous studies which have suggested that when teachers are stressed, they are less likely to be emotionally available to children, decreasing the intensity of their responses to children and has been linked to negative responsiveness toward children's emotions (Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazaglou, 2005; Zinsser et al. 2013, Dearth-Wesley & Gooze, 2015; Buettner, Jeon, Hur, & Garcia, 2016). Teachers' voices suggest that it can be difficult for them to consistently respond sensitively given the nature of the requirements of the school, the classroom environment, and the nature of children's developmental skill level.

The findings from this study emphasize that early childhood teachers experience stress and burnout in high quality environments such as the one described in this study, which further highlights that stress and burnout are prevalent in all types of pre-kindergarten programs. Given the high percentages of turnover in this profession (NACCRRA; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003; NAEYC, 2004; Korjenevitch & Dunifon, 2010; Porter, 2012; Grant, Jeon, & Buettner, 2019), it would be beneficial to understand what aspects of this particular type of environment buffer against turnover. An interesting finding is that the teachers interviewed are long-term faculty members at the school and all have between nine to forty-four years of teaching experience. Each of the teachers interviewed spent a large amount of their teaching careers at this school. The time they spend at the school, the changes they experience together, and the support they provide each other during the personal moments in their lives strengthens their bond to both the school and their fellow teachers, and may be, in itself, a buffer against occupational stress. This finding may be consistent with recent literature that finds that there are intrinsic motivators that are likely to

influence a teachers' intentions to remain at a school, move to a new school, or leave the field all together (Grant, et. al. 2019). The teachers perceive their work environment to be favorable and enjoy working with their colleagues, which may be a factor in their tenure at the school. This is an interesting concept to explore in future studies, including exploring in more depth these intrinsic motivators to remain employed at the same school for long periods.

Subsystems within organizations are composed of individual members, in smaller groups that form or as whole-groups. This study examines a small group of teachers chosen organically. Organizational climate refers to the teachers' perceptions of their work environment (Hoy, et. al. 1991, p. 9) and the overall personality of the school as defined by its members (Halpin, 1966). This study chooses to examine teacher sensitivity from a multi-faceted approach to include the teacher's perspective as well as the perceived health of the school as determined by its members, or its organizational climate. This study presents a non-linear perspective of teacher sensitivity and the organizational climate of the school. The climate of the school makes an impression on the teacher and affects their ability to do their job effectively. In this school, responding to children sensitively is a key job requirement. It is hopeful that discoveries learned in this pre-kindergarten public school setting as they relate to school climate can be modified and duplicated in a childcare setting where overlapping makes sense. Notwithstanding the importance of teacher sensitivity, the climate of a school is important in its own right and warrants further investigation as it pertains to pre-kindergarten elementary schools (Bloom, 2015).

***Organizational Climate.*** In order to add depth to this qualitative study, the OCDQ-RE survey was administered to faculty who participated in the interview and focus group process as a part of the data triangulation of multiple sources and to get another sense of the health of the school. The OCDQ-RE for this school resulted in an *Engaged Climate*, where the Teacher

Openness was slightly above average, and the Principal Openness was slightly below average. However, since such small number of surveys were submitted, these responses and conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire population of the school but can only serve as validity to the participants who chose to be a part of this project. Even those members who had retired felt a strong connection to the school upon reflection and spoke of their tenure with pride. The results of the survey, although participation was small, was reflective of teacher responses of the school, depicting an overall healthy climate, where competence and knowledge are influential over position and charisma. Collaboration rather than coercion is reflected in the responses to this survey and go along with the results from other data measures conducted in this study. In addition, this finding supports conclusions reached by Hoy & Tarter (1992) that:

Informal relations between each other, individual personalities and leadership qualities influence organizational climate, its set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members (p.74).

This school seems to have members who are attracted to this campus, take pride in their positions within the school, and wish to remain employed there, given the long tenured members of the case spoken to in this study. They are influenced by the organization and work in a collaborative fashion to remain cohesive. The morale of the members who participate in this study appears to be high, and they have a strong sense of well-being. The teachers who participated in this study are long-term faculty and have many years of experience. It has been reported that teachers with more professional experience make reflections that are more external on their work environment as opposed to internal reflections as with newer teachers. This could contribute to the level of depth reported by the teachers in relation to disruptors of sensitivity. More experienced teachers tend to be more critical of their existing work environment and make



comparisons to past working environments, and therefore, are more critical (Veziroglu-Celik & Yildiz, 2018, p. 93). These findings seem to support the work of Bloom (1988); Karoly, et. al. (2013); and Zinsser et al. (2016a) that interpersonal characteristics (Zinsser, et. al. 2016b) of the workplace, such as working conditions, emotional demands, co-worker relationships, access to resources and support are attributed to the overall workplace climate.

The participant responses serve to further validate that this school has an overall healthy, engaged climate. This aligns with Hoy, et al.'s (1991) findings that in healthy organizations, new procedures that enable them to move toward new objectives, produce new products and diversity that are invented when confronted with problems. Such systems grow, develop, and change rather than remain formalized and standardized. Innovativeness is the organization's ability to invent new procedures, move to new goals and objectives, and become more differentiated over time. In this sense, the school is able to use its environment constructively. Since the overall health of this organization is more than the perceptions of this small group, these findings cannot be generalized to the entire school, but can add a layer of validation to what the teachers in this study report in their interviews and focus group responses.

## **Summary**

Teachers are the developing individual in the center of their ecology. The findings from this project seem to confirm Ecological Systems Theory as it relates to the teacher at the center of the system in his/her relationship to the environment. In reflecting on the teachers' voices, it seems that teacher sensitivity is affected by not only the quality of the interactions between teachers and children, but a combination of several other factors, which influence teachers' work. These factors include specific teaching strategies, the teachers' working environment, the administration's support, the relationships among the faculty, the level of family engagement and

their knowledge of child development, and the teachers' own ability to effectively cope with workplace stress. This is in line with existing literature that suggests that in examining an individual's actions, one must investigate the interaction between personal characteristics of the group in which they belong (Hemmelgam, Glisson & James, 2006; Owens & Valesky, 2011, Roeser, Urdan & Stephens, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) framework provides for multiple contexts to influence the developing person. In this project, there are multiple factors that are discovered to both help and hinder teacher sensitivity. This study concluded that teachers rely on interconnections among each other as their greatest sources of support, and these interconnections are reflective of a healthy organizational climate and key to building a capacity to respond sensitively to children. This theory is also supported in the research findings of this project. Bronfenbrenner's framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) provides for multiple contexts to influence development. For this project, the context is the ability of teachers to be sensitive, shaping their development of sensitivity. Ecological systems theory situates the individual as the center of their development in a series of nested circles that the individual interacts with via proximal processes. The psychological spaces that fill these circles shape our development by interacting together and influencing the individual.

In keeping with Ecological Systems Theory, it can be postulated that a teacher's development of sensitivity is influenced from multiple contexts and each context can serve as a way to help or hinder that development. Describing their journey to becoming sensitive is complex and did not yield the responses I had assumed, but nevertheless, adds a layer of knowledge to this concept that teacher sensitivity is complex and can continue to be explored. Early childhood administrators and policy makers must find out more about how a teacher is able

to engage in sensitive interactions with children so that they are able to provide the right supports for them. The nature of the professional work setting, the specific program challenges that are evident in this age group, and the challenges of working with pre-kindergarten children and their families affect the expression of sensitivity more than other aspects of the environment and have a significant influence on the teacher's response to children. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) highlights, "the differentiating regions of the environment, some embedded in others, some interconnected, others isolated, but all interacting to steer behavior and development of the person" (p. 203) need to be considered as it relates to teachers and their expression of sensitivity.

These findings presented in this paper embody the essence of NAEYC (2009)'s statement on standards that programs should adhere to providing caring relationships, providing a well-rounded curriculum, employing teachers who are trained in early childhood development and education, providing continuing assessment of children, keeping children healthy and safe, working with families, engaging in quality community relationships, providing a physical environment that is supportive of child-guided experiences, and having a leadership and management team who promote a climate of learning and support.

### **Limitations**

Like any other research project, the interpretation of results should be considered in light of the project limitations. The data collection process in which the researcher is embedded in the context has some limitations. The practice of observing is "detailed, tedious work" (Neuman, 2000, p. 361). The researcher must be able to jot down key events, quotes, and relevant behaviors as they occur. When a researcher cannot fully document his/her observations immediately, the possibility of distortion and unintentional misrepresentation increases, making a greater possibility for a flawed recall (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996, p. 293).

Collecting observations was not an easy task with certain participants. It may have seemed intrusive and certain participants presented special problems with providing information (Creswell, 2014). Not all participants were willing to provide honest and truthful responses during interviews. The participants may have provided answers that they believe the researcher would like to hear, instead of their honest feelings and thoughts, creating participant bias. Documents that are considered public were not necessarily accessible to the researcher and private documents were not accessed due to confidentiality.

During the research process, the researcher was open to experiencing a broad range of situations and separated personal feelings and biases from the field experience itself. The relevance of the researcher's emotional state, personal experiences, and feelings both with preconceived notions and through the process itself was recognized, as these two things could have impacted the integrity of the project. The researcher encountered different personalities among participants, some who were not willing to participate in the research process. The researcher was careful when phrasing questions so as not to be elicit certain responses. This may have limited the amount of data that was captured.

Time was also a limitation to this project and part of a defining boundary of this study. Binding this case by time (end of the school year, beginning of the new school year) and place (a specific elementary school) ensured that this study stayed the course in maintaining the focus on teacher sensitivity. The end of the school year is a time when teachers may be anxious to experience the long summer break, which may have affected their responses. The beginning of the school year is a time when teachers are fresh from a long break; this time may allow for too much optimism in their accurate descriptions of their experiences. Focusing on a particular period in time ensures that the boundaries of this case are well defined, which helps illuminate

the breadth and depth of the study (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This type of in-depth study required the researcher to build a rapport with the members and establish credibility among them. This consumed a great amount of time, requiring the researcher to be physically present in the setting, or agreeing to meet at a general location outside of the school and for the time to accurately record, collect, and transcribe the experiences and conversations that were used in the development of an emergent theory. Due to the intense nature of the study and the time consuming nature of data collection, this project was limited by time (time expenses include traveling to the location, meeting with participants to discuss the scope of project, scheduling observations when they are optimal for participants, returning to school to meet with members, both in a formal and informal setting, time to conduct observations and wait on return responses, and time needed to travel back to the home location to upload and transcribe the data.

The specific limitation of this research study revolves around the study method: “Anecdotal information is subject to interpretation by the researcher” (Adams & Lawrence, 2015, p. 471). The researcher engaged in both direct and participant observations as methods to collect data. Immediately before and immediately following an observation, participation event, interviews, and the focus group, the researcher would use the Clear Record App on an iPhone to record notes and observations. This method could have resulted in some aspects of the moment being forgotten since it was not being recorded in real-time, but shortly afterwards. Transcription of notes occurred after each recording. Analysis of this data occurred while notes were being written and while I was conducting observations.

The participants’ biases toward their school and their administration could have affected the types of responses they disclosed. Teachers report a strong sense of support from colleagues throughout the school. Teachers also report a strong relationship with colleagues both inside and

outside of the classroom. The strong ties they have to their colleagues may have favorably biased their opinions toward one another and their perceptions of their collegiality. All participants shared that the teachers at this school are members of a very close community. It may have been that the teachers did not want to disparage any of their colleagues and actually highlighted the importance of a strong collegial network. Most of the participants are currently employed at the school, and although are somewhat open to sharing their feelings about the administration and their school district's policies and practices, they may have been conscious of their responses, and this may influence their opinions which are mostly presented in a positive way. Indeed, Sage and Rose, who are no longer active members of the school, appear more candid in their responses, perhaps because they did not have to think about how their commentary will affect their current positions. It would be interesting to get more retired teachers' perspectives as a way means of eliminating this factor.

It is important to note that, while there are no deviations from my Chapter 3 methodologies plans, during the study, I engaged in participant observation, which placed me at the school daily. For data collection, I enrolled my own child in this school as part of the process of the researcher immersing into the experience of the project. I concluded the project with more data resulting from direct and participant observations than I actually formally recorded. I was able to take many recorded notes, and using the outline I had planned, I was able to make sense of the information gleaned from all experiences and include the results in Chapter 4. I had to sift through a wealth of data, determine what were the most common themes from all sources of data, and determine what to include in this project's results. There is a great deal of data to consider that can be analyzed for further research studies.

Of all the methods used to collect data, the one that was found to be the most difficult was objectivity when the researcher engaged in participant observations in the role of a parent. However, the methods used are in the best interest to get the researcher evaluating whether the commentary provided was objective or subjective in nature. In that regard, professional stance was maintained throughout the project. It is however possible that the researcher role as a participant observer, may be complicated by the dual role as “parent,” and may make it difficult to be completely objective at times. The research carefully adhered to researcher protocols while engaged in participant observations. In spite of the researcher efforts to separate these roles, one may have informed the other.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

The study findings are important because there are factors related to the school, the children and families, and the teachers, themselves, when considering the concept of teacher sensitivity. There is much to be learned from studying this type of early childhood environment. In many respects, it is an ideal setting for both faculty and children. There are systems and practices in place at this school, which could benefit the larger early childhood community. Identifying supports and disruptors to sensitivity from the teacher’s perspective is important because there has been a lack in the literature on the experiences of teachers concerning what they think helps or hinders their ability to be sensitive. These factors illuminated in this present project answer the call for researchers to understand that early childhood settings should be identified in considerable detail, learning how they operate and should be approached as a multi-dimensional construct to identify social-psychological processes (Zimiles, 1993; Maier, 1979; Powell, 1982). This project captures teachers’ voices on this topic in an attempt to further understand teacher sensitivity from a non-linear perspective in this type of school setting.

This study highlights both the complexities and challenges of working with pre-kindergarten children and their families. It is evident that factors that both support and challenge teacher sensitivity exist in the professional work setting, among the faculty themselves, and among the children and families. These factors appear to have influence over teaching behaviors; however, each of these factors must continue to be explored.

The methods used in this project have not been commonly used in past studies. In addition, there have been few studies of teacher sensitivity that use a qualitative method for exploration, making this project an important contribution to the body of knowledge about teacher sensitivity in early childhood. While the researcher and this study do not suggest that a teacher can be taught how to be sensitive, recognizing the skills that are required to be sensitive has an important place in early childhood and the skills that are required to respond to children can be taught to teachers. Identifying teacher sensitivity from a non-linear perspective, using qualitative methods reveals that there are certain skills that are present in teachers and within the school itself that contribute to teacher sensitivity, both positively and negatively. Although this project does not attempt to determine the characteristics of a sensitive teacher, there is more clarity into factors that contribute to or in some way hinder a teacher's ability to be sensitive. The teachers in this project appear to have a strong sense of what teacher sensitivity means and what specific strategies are present within themselves and the factors in their work environment that impact their relationships with children. The larger early childhood community can benefit from understanding these types of factors that affect teacher - child interactions in more depth. Providing administrators and teachers with this information raises awareness to the types of things within the school environment that need to be taken into consideration as they relate to hiring and retaining teachers, teacher burnout, and the overall organizational climate of a school



setting. This project has brought forth new insights into factors that affect teacher sensitivity from teachers' voices concerning their teaching strategies, the administrative support they receive, and factors that exist within themselves, the children, and the families.

The major findings that impact teachers' sensitivity as it relates to their work environment can be generalized to the larger population as it compares to school size and age group served in elementary schools. These findings can be generalized in a limited fashion to other early childhood settings and populations who work with this age group, such as childcare centers, family childcare homes, and other elementary schools with the hopes of improving these settings to enhance teacher sensitivity. The qualities that affect this group of teachers at this school are similar to those that affect other types of schools whose population centers around pre-kindergarten children and this type of study should be considered in other types of childcare settings.

For administrators, there are certain qualities to consider as they relate to hiring teachers and retaining teachers. To recognize teachers who may best be in a position to engage in sensitive interactions, administrators should hire teachers who can recognize certain strategies that they can use to identify and respond to children's cues in a timely manner. The strategies identified in this paper; being a good listener, encouraging empathy, promoting social - emotional literacy, and observing children can be introduced to new teachers as tools they can use to help notice and respond to children's cues. These strategies may reduce teacher turnover (Porter, 2012). Pairing teachers together who are already demonstrating these strategies may also be a helpful way to retain faculty. The work setting at this school clearly contributes to enhancing the sensitivity and responsiveness of caregiver interactions. The setting helps teachers

to behave in ways that support children's developmental needs, despite the normal challenges that arise out of working with this age group and their families.

Understanding how the ecological system of an organization's work environment and its impact on childcare quality are related can provide a foundation for improving quality by focusing on teachers' needs so they can do their jobs effectively (Lower & Cassidy, 2007). Providing teachers with a guiding framework, a supportive work environment, and a strong professional network is essential so that they can thrive in this environment. Focusing on these things will ensure that children have the best possible outcomes while in this critical period of their lives in terms of their social-emotional development. Administrators should be aware of the certain aspects of the work environment that can be manipulated, such as creating opportunities for teachers to gather, creating designated teacher planning time into the school day, providing supports for faculty connections, and plan for specific times for informal connections to take place, and limiting the amount of classroom interruptions. Having these structures in place, and adhering to a guiding philosophy, combined with an administration who is willing to help teachers balance their work and personal lives is essential. In thinking about ways to help schools to be more mindful of teacher sensitivity, these factors should be considered, and each should be explored in more depth as they relate to different types of early childhood settings.

A qualified, dedicated, and experienced teacher is essential; however, as more programs affiliated with school districts appear, programs must have systems in place that consider the quality of sensitive teacher-child interactions, which is a necessary component of a high-quality learning environment. This early childhood environment has unique qualities that allow teachers to thrive and engage with children positively, despite the challenges within the school, the population, and the teachers themselves, which should be further explored as standards for

practice and policymaking within schools. Several components of this school appear to work positively for teachers in their ability to respond sensitively to children. These particular components need to be further investigated in order to apply to more general early childhood settings, especially those who serve children birth to age eight. For example, it will be interesting to examine how teacher camaraderie and collaboration are supported within the early childhood environment, since they are reported as strong supports of teacher sensitivity.

This particular type of professional work setting presents its own set of challenges with respect to program management for pre-kindergarten children's school settings. Each teacher reveals her own experience and its impact on her teaching practices. This supports the notion that teachers in the same work setting may perceive levels of support very differently. How a teacher perceives the climate of the organization where he/she works may affect their emotions in the classroom and their social-emotional teaching practices (Zinsser et al. 2016). It will be interesting to unpack the specific components of the organization that have been described in this study as having an effect on a teacher's response to children so that there is a clear understanding in greater depth, the nature of what processes within the school contribute to teacher sensitivity. For example, there can be studies, which explore the effects of implementing certain interventions to see if they will have an impact on teacher sensitivity in terms of the number of classrooms disruptions and family engagement. These types of studies may yield results that affect other areas of the early childhood environment as well.

The child's developing skills within this environment highlights how important it is to educate pre-service teachers and those teachers who make the transition from teaching other elementary school grade levels to teaching pre-kindergarten since pre-kindergarten children bring their tender vulnerabilities to the classroom. As more districts take on the important step of

including multiple ages of children into the larger school system network and work to create unique programs for children under five, teachers and administrators must be trained on how to help children develop social-emotional skills. Taking the points learned in this study, it would be interesting to uncover the understanding of this concept as it relates to teachers who teach children ages five to eight years old as well, since this age group is included in early childhood.

There is going to be a considerable amount of emotional energy spent by the teacher to help children achieve emotional regulation. This is a factor that needs considerable attention when training teachers, to assure that pre-service teachers and teachers new to this age group, are familiar with this aspect of the job before working as the lead teacher. Pre-kindergarten teachers need to be professionally prepared for the emotional energy that will be spent each day in the classroom and how this skill set can lead to its own emotional challenges within the teacher. Furthermore, this awareness may actually reduce teacher turnover rates, since creating awareness may help teachers be better prepared for their work with this age group. This idea is in line with the accountability among teachers and programs to include teacher sensitivity as a component of program quality (Hamre, et. al. 2009). In addition, future research needs to be done to explore ways to get families involved on a deeper level about family engagement and recognize the types of school involvement that leads to increased active participation of families. Several areas for future studies can capture parent data on school engagement and their knowledge of child development, longitudinal child outcome data, and how administrators make decisions, as well as how the teacher affects the emotional climate of the classroom. This qualitative research project provides a first step in uncovering more information about teacher sensitivity. As researcher continue to investigate teacher sensitivity, future studies might include a multi-faceted approach to investigate teachers' perspective, as well as the organizational structure and climate.

Considering larger populations of teachers in multiple schools, and other types of early childhood school settings, such as Head Start, Early Head Start, childcare centers, and family childcare homes would further illuminate these questions. In addition, future studies should consider administering the OCDQ-RE survey to a greater percentage of teachers in a context than this study to gain a better understanding of organizational climate as it relates to the school environment. Using the data from this project, future research might create a survey to further explore teachers' attitudes towards factors that are revealed associated with teacher sensitivity.

This project highlights the professional work setting challenges of program management for pre-kindergarten children and illuminates new factors to consider and account for that exist within the early learning environment as it relates to teacher sensitivity. Few studies look at the outside features of the classroom in relation to the organizational influences perceived by the early childhood teacher. This study brings forth new knowledge that can have real-world practical implications in the field for program designers and administrators, as well as district supervisors and state policy makers.

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## **APPENDIX A: DISTRICT REQUEST FOR APPROVAL**

Parish School System

Elementary School

March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Principal:

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your Elementary School. I am currently enrolled in the College of Human Sciences and Education, Curriculum & Instruction, Early Childhood Education at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA, and am in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation.

I am currently the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Child and Family Studies Early Childhood Lab School Director and an instructor in the College of Liberal Arts, Child and Family Studies Program. I have over twenty years of experience working with pre-kindergarten aged children and teaching faculty, staff, and parents. I am also a reliable CLASS<sup>®</sup> trained observer. I have visited your school multiple times in that latter role working with the Picard Center.

As part of the fulfillment of my doctoral dissertation requirements, I will be conducting a single case study design that includes collecting data from multiple sources: pre-kindergarten teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, volunteers, and school board personnel, along with any additional members of the school. I will not be interviewing children. I would like to work with the members of your school, and I am interested in your participation in order to make this project happen.



I am interested in teacher sensitivity and organizational climate of an early childhood school setting and your school seems as if it is the ideal place to collect data that would be beneficial to the early childhood field. I would like the chance to meet with you to discuss in more detail what this case study design looks like and the opportunity that your school would have to assist me in completing this process. Although the school name and any interviews are anonymous and confidential, I could offer you valuable insight into the process of exploring teacher sensitivity and organizational climate from a case study perspective as I go through this journey.

This study would last approximately 6 weeks (without including the state testing week). I am looking to begin when we return from Spring Break and be finished by the end of the school year. I would plan on being at your school for 1-4 hours per day at least 3 days per week during that time and would be completely respectful of days/times when it is not a good time to have outside visitors, at your discretion.

I look forward to hearing back from you by April 22<sup>nd</sup>. If you would kindly contact me by email ([anjenette@louisiana.edu](mailto:anjenette@louisiana.edu) or [aholm25@lsu.edu](mailto:aholm25@lsu.edu)) or telephone), I would most appreciate your time and attention to this project. I am copying my major professor and co-researcher on this project as well, Dr. Jennifer Baumgartner.

Sincerely,

Anjenette Holmes, M.S. Ed.S.

## APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



**TO:** Anjenette Holmes  
Education

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** June 12, 2017

**RE:** IRB# E10507

**TITLE:** Organizational Climate and Early Childhood Teacher Sensitivity: A Case Study

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
[lsu.edu/research](http://lsu.edu/research)

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 6/12/2017

**Approved**     X     **Disapproved**                     

**Approval Date:** 6/12/2017 **Approval Expiration Date:** 6/11/2020

**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 1

**Signed Consent Waived?:** No

**Re-review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable)

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman 

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –  
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.**

- Conduct an in-depth interview where the respondent has to answer preset open-ended questions. Provide follow-up or prompt respondents as needed to ensure a smooth conversation and to help the participant become comfortable.
- Interview each member of the case only once.
- The duration should be 30 minutes to 1 hour in length, using interview script.

### **Semi-Structured Interview Script.**

#### **Introduction and consent to record.**

“Hi, thank-you for taking the time to visit with me today for an interview. I will ask your permission to record this interview so that I may go back and write notes regarding our conversation for my dissertation project. Now that I have your approval, let’s begin. I will ask you a series of open-ended questions regarding the organizational climate of your school. I will begin with general biographical information, and then move to information about the school, your role, support, recognition, and school pride. If you do not understand a question, I will be happy to clarify with additional information. If at any time you do not want to answer a question, just tell me verbally or shake your head ‘no’ and we will skip over to the next question.”

#### ***General biographical and historical information.***

“Describe your educational background and position within this school.”

“Describe your previous work experience.”

“Describe how you came to work here at this school.”

“Tell me if you can about any background information you have on this school. For example, what is the history behind this school, what are its roots that you know of?”

***Pride.***

“What is your general opinion of this school?”

“Has it evolved since you have begun working here?”

“How is pride demonstrated on campus?”

“What are you most proud at this school?”

“What do you think the teachers are most proud of here at this school?”

***Leadership.***

“What is your view of early childhood education?”

“How do you ensure a successful start to the school year?”

“What does effective instructional leadership look like to you?”

“Describe the school climate.”

“Can you tell me more about that?”

***Supportive.***

“Describe what the approach is to supporting teachers relating to their teaching practices.”

“Describe how you feel supported at school.”

“How do you feel about professional support? For example, what are the supports in place for teachers/support staff struggling with work related issues or who are below performance standards?”

“Can you tell me positive or negative impacts work has had on your life?”

“How do you feel about personal support? How do personal situations impact the classroom or work performance?”

***Caring.***

“How are new teachers onboarded to the campus?”

“Describe any rituals or protocols in place?”

“How is care and concern shown to each other among this school?”

“What is your general feeling about your work?”

“How do you maintain morale?”

“When problems arise, how is the matter communicated?”

“How does your family feel about your work?”

***Recognition.***

“Describe how teachers and other staff members are recognized for their achievements at this school. For example, are their formal and informal ways of letting people know they have done a good job?”

“Describe what you think others would say regarding the amount of recognition they receive for their efforts from the administration and from colleagues?”

***Conclusion.***

“Thank-you for your time today.”

“Would you like to share any additional information?”

“This concludes the interview.”

## **APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

- Groups (3–6 people) of pre-kindergarten teachers will be interviewed in a discussion setting with the researcher.
- The time frame is for a period of approximately 45–90 minutes.
- It is planned to have at least 4 to 5 focus groups with the same set of questions.
- Key individuals will nominate other people they think will want to participate, known for their ability to share opinions, and can make time to discuss.
- Participants can also be recruited from a flyer or email.
- Call each one of the focus group members to confirm interest and participation. Once this has been established, give them times and locations of the focus group. Let the participants know a confirmation reminder will be given by phone or email two days prior to the group meeting.

**Inclusion/exclusion criteria.** Must be identified as the lead pre-kindergarten teacher in the classroom.

### **Example of confirmation reminder letter.**

May, 2018

Dear: \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the focus group. As discussed on the phone/in person/email, I would like to hear your ideas and opinions about teacher sensitivity and organizational climate. You will be in a group with 3–6 other teachers at this school. Your responses will be kept anonymous. Light refreshments will be served. You will receive a \$10.00 cash for your participation. In addition, your name will be entered in a drawing for a \$50.00 gift card to a local school supply shop.

***Focus group script.***

***Introduction.*** "Thank-you so much for your time this afternoon." My name is Anjenette Holmes. I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education and Human Sciences at LSU. I am so glad you decided to come here today and help with this study. As I explained in the email, I am going to ask you some questions about how organizational climate and teacher sensitivity in early childhood pre-kindergarten programs."

***Confidentiality and permissions.*** "Let's take a moment to discuss confidentiality and make sure I have everyone's written permission to participate. Ok, now I would like to let you know this will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes of your time. I want to record this focus group discussion so that I may transcribe it later for the purposes of documenting my research notes. Do I have each person's permission to record?"

***Group agreements.*** "Let's agree on some basic rules of group conversation and participant conduct." Group will come up with a few rules regarding behavior and conduct.

***Icebreaker.*** "Let's find out a little more about each other by going around the table and introducing ourselves. Please give your first name and if you have any pets, please tell us their names. Just for fun, please share your favorite food to cook or eat! I will go first!"

***Warm-up questions.*** "I'd like to start with just a few general questions about teacher sensitivity."

"How many years of teaching experience do you have? "

"What do you think is most important characteristic of a teacher?"

***Main question set 1.*** "The definition of teacher *sensitivity* includes interactions that tend to show consistent expectations, a positive regard for children, and synchronized interactions

with their students (Rimm-Kaufman et. al., 2003). It encompasses the timing, intensity, and sincerity in which a teacher responds to cues from students.”

“When you hear this description of teacher sensitivity would you agree with this description?”

“Tell me about what teacher sensitivity means to you.”

“Tell me a little about your journey to becoming an early childhood teacher.”

“When did you decide to become a teacher? Who or what events influenced you to take this career path?”

“Teacher sensitivity has roots within parental sensitivity. How is your role of teacher like that of a parent? Give an example of a teacher-student interaction when you may have been reminded of this.”

“What was the context? What was the outcome of the interaction from your perspective?”

“How does teacher sensitivity exist in your classroom environment?”

“What kinds of experiences allow for a teacher to be sensitive?”

“Describe your awareness of children’s academic and social needs.”

“How do you provide comfort and reassurance to children?”

“What makes it difficult for a teacher to be sensitive?”

“What do you notice about the role the school takes in promoting teacher sensitivity?”

**Transition.** “Now I would like to talk about your perception of organizational climate within X School.”

**Main question set 2.** Review the definition:

The “Definition of ‘organizational climate’: includes overall institutionalization of the school, the administrative structural support of the school, and specific teacher morale among the faculty” (Hoy & Tarter, 1992). “This can be seen as the overall values, beliefs, attitude,



perceived supportiveness, procedures, and routines” (Jorde-Bloom, 2015). Check for understanding between among participants.

“Tell me a little about your experience here at X school.”

“When did you start working here?”

“Describe your experience a new teacher here?”

“Tell me about the culture of the school.”

“Think back on some instances involving the teachers here at your school. How does teacher morale contribute (positively, neutrally, or negatively) to the overall organizational climate of this school?”

“What is it like to be a teacher here at X school.”

“How does the organization support this effort?

“How specific a role does you think other members of the school play in framing the organizational climate here?

“What supports are available? “

“What helped you?”

“What are some specific examples of things that your colleagues have done or that you have done to affect the climate at your school? How did these actions/gestures affect the climate? How did these actions affect you personally?”

“In thinking about challenges, you may have faced as a teacher, what /who within your organization has helped you through the process?”

“What is your perception of the health of the school climate?

“In your opinion, what other factors have an impact on organizational climate?”

“Looking back on times when you have felt that the organizational climate was positive, describe the situation and what if any impact the administrators had on this? Specific examples.

***Wrap-up questions.***

“These are all the questions I have for you.”

"Thank-you so much for your time today. I hope you have enjoyed this discussion. I am available to meet with you privately if you would like to provide additional information or additional context to the discussion."

## APPENDIX E: FORMAL OBSERVATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

### Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS<sup>®</sup>) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2002, 2005, 2008)

Children's social and emotional functioning is linked to effective classroom practices, (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). This assessment is designed to measure teaching interactions in the context of three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in classrooms in preschool through grade three. There are ten dimensions within the three domains. The researcher is *CLASS<sup>®</sup> Reliable in Pre-K and Toddler*.

Example of Emotional Support Domain:

<u>Positive Climate (PC)</u> Relationships Positive Affect Positive Communication	<u>Negative Climate (NC)</u> Negative Affect Punitive Control Sarcasm/Disrespect Severe Negativity
<u>Teacher Sensitivity (TS)</u> Awareness Responsiveness Addresses Problems Student Comfort	

Note. Each dimension is scored in a range between 1-7 (1 is lowest, 7 is highest).

#### ***Reliability and Validity of CLASS<sup>®</sup>.***

Class dimensions are moderately to highly correlate with one another. Each domain has adequate and internal consistency across studies (p.94).

### **The Organizational Climate Description for Elementary Schools OCDQ-RE (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991) (*The author has granted use permission to the researcher.*)**

This survey was designed to assess teacher perceptions of school climate by focusing on two dimensions, teacher behavior and principal behavior, as seen from the teacher's point of view (Hoy, et al. 1991). The dimensions are divided into two categories: principal's behavior and

teacher's behavior (Hoy & Clover, 1986). This survey will attempt to determine the organizational climate of the school as seen from the teacher's perspective (Hoy, et al. 1986, 1991). The updated OCDQ-RE measures changes in organizational climate as a continuum from an open organization to a closed organization (Hoy, 1991). There are six interrelated concepts in the OCDQ-RE:

- Supportive principal- which reflects an idea that the principal is open to teacher suggestions and the faculty is respected
- Directive principal- in which there is rigid supervision with tight control over teacher and school activities
- Restrictive principal- which is behavior that hinders rather than facilitates teacher work (paperwork, routine duties, extra activities) which distracts from a teacher's instruction time and preparation
- Collegial teacher- this looks at if teachers are proud of their school, enjoy working with colleagues
- Intimate teacher- this dimension examines strong social relations among teachers
- Disengaged teacher- examines a lack of teacher meaning where teacher behavior is negative or critical of their colleagues or school.

The OCDQ-RE attempts to measure if certain factors are present or not present using a Likert-type scale, originally developed by Rensis Likert. These factors include perceptions of school climate, behavior of the principal and teacher, and other general factors surrounding the school environment. This survey is composed of forty-two questions and scored using a four-point Likert-type scale: (1 = Rarely Occurs, 2 = Sometimes Occurs, 3 = Often Occurs, 4 = Very Frequently Occurs).

***Reliability and validity of OCDQ-RE.*** The reliability scores for this scale have been measured by subtest of the scale and the author indicates that reliability scores were relatively high: Supportive (.94), Directive (.88), Restrictive (.81), Collegial (.87), Intimate (.83), and Disengaged (.78). Construct validity of each dimension of openness correlated positively with an index of principal openness ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991).

## APPENDIX F: BASIS FOR THE DIRECT OBSERVATION

During 30-minutes to a one-hour period, the following observation protocol occurred:

1. Gather necessary items to bring identification, clipboard, paperwork, writing tools, recording device, watch. Arrive at site. Park in visitor's parking.
2. (00:00 – 00:05). Walk-on campus and immediately report to front office. Introductions, show identification, sign-in. Tell office timeframe of visit and where/who I will visit.
3. (00:05 – 00:10). Meet with key personnel who are available to ask what events or schedule changes are planned for the day. Tell office personnel that researcher will be walking around the school for approximately 30 minutes to 2 hours.
4. (00:10 – 00:15). Take detailed field notes on arrival experience.
5. (00:15 – 00:45). Conduct *Climate Walk* school walk-through, complete checklist.
6. (00:45 – 01:00). Take detailed field notes, noting any member interactions and conversations, occurrences, and events that were observed during the walk-through.
7. (00:45 – 01:00). During this period specific tasks will occur.
  - a. (Weeks 01 – 07). Make connections and establish rapport with members during walk, begin introducing depth and scope of project to anyone who is interested.
  - b. (Weeks 04 – 05). Invite, recruit up to 12 lead Pre-K teachers to participate in an interview to be scheduled at their convenience, introduce the ODCQ-RE survey.
  - c. (Week 05-24). Invite members to participate in focus groups.
  - d. (Week 06-20). Continue to collect observational data. Invite members to interview / focus group if there is any interest.
  - e. (Week 07-24). Wrap up data collection. Meet with members who did not get to speak with informally or in the formal interview / focus group setting.

8. (1:30 – 1:50). Take additional field notes on this experience.
9. (1:00 – 2:00). Walk to front office, sign out and let someone in the office know that I am leaving the building and when I expect to return.
10. (Week 09). Complete final Climate Walk of the school.

## APPENDIX G: SCHOOL CLIMATE WALK-THROUGH

This climate walk was created by the researcher, with portions adapted from the following: Baltimore City Schools, [www.baltimorecityschools.org](http://www.baltimorecityschools.org), Texas center for district and school support, <https://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=51539612409>, and ECERS-R, Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005.

	Observation	Observed Date	Not Observed	No Opportunity to Observe	Comments
<b>School Safety Physical</b>	Rules are posted in common areas, classrooms and reflective in practices.				
	Staff members discuss rules amongst each other, remind others.				
	Visitors, are greeted by staff, provided with a visitor's pass, and directed to the appropriate location upon entering the building.				
	Indoor/Outdoor Spaces have physical barriers to prevent random people from entering and prevent children from exiting unsupervised.				
	The main office is an orderly and well-managed environment				
	The main office has students seated while waiting to be attended. What are students doing, is it the same students as when researcher arrived?				
	The physical environment is welcoming and supportive of learning for all students.				
	Classrooms are supportive of learning and are included within the school community; classrooms are not identified as singling out one particular group.				
	The physical and communal spaces (cafeteria, library, outdoors) is utilized effectively				



	and routinely checked by members for physical hazards, students/people lingering or loitering.				
	The hallways include current examples of student work, accolades, or recognition, as well as expectations of student behavior, including rewards system and/or positive reinforcement.				
	Bathrooms (members / children are clean and in working condition with supplies.				
	The classrooms include current examples of student work, accolades, or recognition, as well as expectations of student behavior, including rewards system and/or positive reinforcement				
<b>Social □ Emotional Security</b>	Students are being respectful to one another and to staff members. Note examples.				
	Staff members are respectful/positive to students and to one another. Note examples.				
	Transition times are of appropriate length and effectively monitored by members.				
	Movement during transitions is orderly (students appear to stay focused on what to do next without disruptions)				
	Responsibilities are shared amongst members of the same position.				
	Support staff, teachers, and administrators are visible and engaging with students during transitions and at other times of the day.				
	Program promotes positive engagement among all staff members of different positions. Supervisors regularly check in with members to evaluate				

	work and offer feedback on performance.				
	Community resources are posted in adult spaces for members regarding counseling, support groups, financial counseling, time□management, and family matters.				
<b>Professionalism</b>	Adults have (separate from children’s spaces) gathering spaces and adult/office furniture is in good condition. Teachers have supplies conducive to learning and managing a classroom.				
	Access to professional reading materials and links to in□services, trainings, continuing education, conferences, workshops posted / provided to members.				
	There is active planning time scheduled for members to collaborate and discuss children, families, curriculum, activities				
	There are opportunities for civic / community engagement posted from outside community partners for members to engage with.				

## APPENDIX H: DATABASE TABLES 1-4

**Database Table 1.**

*Document List*

Number	Page Number	Description
1	17	" <i>Conscious Discipline</i> " Brochure
2	17	Behavior Calendar
3	21	Family Note
4 - 7	38 & 39	Calendar of Events
8	55	Spanish Parent Info
9	55	Value of Play Poem
10 - 13	55	Event-Specific Information
14	58	Family Education Handout

**Database Table 2.**

*Reference Notes*

Number	Page Number	Description
1	27	Climate Walk 1
2	34	Prayer Time
3	35	Camaraderie 1
4	35	Camaraderie 2
5	41	Interruptions

**Database Table 3.**

*Participant Observation*

Number	Page Number	Description
1	12	Teacher In-service
2 , 3	12 & 13	Seashell
4	17	Testing Day
5	19	Teacher In-service
6	20	STAR
7	21	STAR Observation
8	26	Early Childhood Supervisor
9	27	Quote

**Database Table 4.**

*Artifacts List*

Number	Page Number	Description
1	12	Seashell
2	19	" <i>Conscious Discipline</i> " Book
3	27	Teacher of the Year Nominee Form

## **VITA**

Anjenette Victoria Holmes, born in St. Martinville, Louisiana, worked in the early childhood education field for many years after receiving her bachelor's degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana. She began to work as floater teacher at a NAEYC accredited, for profit employer-based on-site childcare setting. While working for the largest for-profit early childhood education company in the United States, she held various positions, including assistant teacher, lead teacher, curriculum specialist, and assistant director. Upon completion of her master's degree, she became the director of this center and then transferred to another childcare center as director. She became an early childhood education regional teacher and director trainer, covering Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. She went on to work in various teaching and training roles in the early childhood education field for many years. Upon completion of her doctorate degree, she will continue working as an early childhood education specialist for a research center at a state university.







