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Parental choice and perceived benefits of Reggio Emilia inspired programs

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ABSTRACT

Despite credible research to support a constructivist-based approach in early childhood programs, policymakers continued to push for a more academic-based philosophy in an effort to reach standardized testing goals. Reggio Emilia, a constructivist-based early childhood philosophy that originated in Northern Italy, has been shown to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate parental experiences when choosing the constructivist-based early childhood program, Reggio Emilia, for their children and to explore parents' perceived benefits after their children attended. Five parents who had enrolled their children at a Reggio Emilia inspired program, Foundations Early Learning Center, in the American Midwest for a minimum of 6 months participated. Results indicated parents identified an overall satisfaction for choosing a Reggio Emilia experience for their preschool children. Ten perceived benefits were associated with their children after they attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Findings of the current study favour the choice of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative options.

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Introduction

For parents, choosing an early childhood program to enrol their children in is an important and complex decision. Historically in the United States, there have been two different approaches to early childhood education that parents can choose from: the traditional, academic, educator-directed (non-constructivist) philosophy versus the child-centred, constructivist philosophy (Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011; Walsh & Petty, 2007; Wana, 2010). With the continued push for high-stakes testing in public schools in the United States, the expectations for early childhood programs are narrowly focused on academics with an educator-directed approach to learning (Apple, 2008; Brown, 2015). However, past research has revealed that a constructivist-based learning model that fosters open-ended, play-based exploration is most beneficial for preschool-aged children. Yet policy-makers continue to push for an academic, predetermined curricular, non-constructivist approach (Mathis, 2011; Öztürk, 2016; Recchia & Bentley, 2013).

One constructivist-based learning model, Reggio Emilia, originated in Northern Italy in the late 1940s with the support of community members and co-founder, Loris Malaguzzi. Since the 1980s, practices of Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool centres in Italy have inspired early childhood programs to implement the ideas into programs in the United States (Reggio Children, 2012). There was a gap in past research on parental experiences choosing this constructivist-based model as well as perceived benefits that their children experienced after attending a Reggio Emilia program in the

United States (Andrews, 2012; Hall, 2013; Pinata, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The purpose of the current study was to understand parental experiences in the United States for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood program and to further investigate what advantages children experienced after attending.

Background

A review of literature revealed a gap in examining reasons why parents in the United States have chosen one early childhood program, Reggio Emilia, over alternative, non-constructivist-based program options and to further understand what perceived benefits parents identified after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program (Andrews, 2012; Grogan, 2012; Johansen, Leibowitz, & Waite, 1996). Past research has been published on various topics regarding Reggio Emilia inspired program philosophy in the United States (Abdelfattah, 2015; Andrews, 2012; Bond, 2015; Firlick, 1995; McCloy & Gillespie, 1998; Smith, 2014; Swann, 2008). Research has also been conducted on benefits for children that have attended preschool (Hall, 2013; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012; Mawdsley & Hauser-Cram, 2013; Recchia & Bentley, 2013). However, there was a gap in the literature on parental experiences for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program as well as exploration of perceived benefits for children who attended a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program in a Midwestern state (Andrews, 2012; Grogan, 2012; Johansen et al., 1996).

In the field of early childhood education, there is an on-going conflict between two different program philosophies: the academic, teacher-directed philosophy versus the interactive child-centred philosophy. The latter is constructivist in approach, and the former is non-constructivist in approach. Evidence has indicated that an educator-directed, academic focused approach to learning in preschool is not developmentally or age appropriate and does not benefit young children's overall growth (Apple, 2008; Brown, 2015; Diamond, 2010; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). Rather, the interactive, child-centred, constructivist approach facilitates greater learning and developmental advances in young children because it supports the way children learn naturally (Christakis, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Nitecki & Chung, 2013). The problem is that despite credible research to support an interactive, constructivist-based curriculum model for preschoolers, policymakers continue to push for a more academic, sit-down, or 'chalk and talk' based preschool approach in an effort to endorse standardized testing supporters (Barbarin et al., 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2005; Brown, 2014; Kim & Darling, 2009; Öztürk, 2016; Swann, 2008).

The Reggio Emilia educational philosophy has been shown to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children (Bond, 2015; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Firlick, 1995; New, 1991). Reggio Emilia program are grounded in developmentally appropriate practices; emergent, project-based learning; and an approach to learning that considers the whole child. The intention of the current research was to provide further data to support developmentally appropriate practice and parents' preferences for a constructivist-based preschool over policymakers' insistence on inappropriate elementary school standards in preschool (Barbarin et al., 2008).

Parental preschool choice

Parents face a difficult decision when choosing an early childhood program that is a best fit for their child. It is the goal of many parents to determine if there is one early childhood program philosophy that is superior over alternatives (Andrews, 2012; Ransom, 2012; Walsh & Petty, 2007; Wana, 2010). In the United States, there are a multitude of early childhood program philosophies for parents to choose from that may include, but are not limited to, Bank Street, High-Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf (Walsh & Petty, 2007). Previous researchers have examined various aspects of Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States, but there is a gap in investigations on parental experiences and associated perceived benefits for choosing a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program for their children (Abdelfattah, 2015; Andrews, 2012; Bond, 2015; Firlick, 1995; McCloy &

Gillespie, 1998; Smith, 2014; Swann, 2008). With minimal research published on how Reggio Emilia philosophy has been adapted into early childhood programs in the United States, this study was conducted to understand lived experiences for parents choosing a Reggio Emilia program in the American Midwest for their children and secondly to identify the associated benefits that parent perceived were achieved after they enrolled their children in a Reggio Emilia inspired program.

Materials & methods

One challenge of the current study was to find a data collection site that was putting the theory of Reggio Emilia philosophy into daily practice. Reggio Emilia philosophy has been adapted from the infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Although early childhood programs outside of Reggio Emilia, Italy find inspiration from the Italian schools, there will never be a program that will fully replicate the Italian program because of the contextual and cultural influence. Every Reggio Emilia inspired program has implemented the philosophy of Reggio Emilia in varying degrees (Abdelfattah, 2015; McClow & Gillespie, 1998).

Purposeful sampling determined the choice of the data collection site. The data collection site was chosen, Foundations Early Learning Center, through the vetting process:

- A recommendation from Kaminsky, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) Exhibit Project Coordinator and Innovations Editor, was to choose an early childhood program that was 'identified as a centre that engaged in some form of study of the Reggio Emilia approach and their work has been influenced as a result.'
- An early childhood program that was listed on the NAREA website. Reggio Emilia inspired programs that are listed on the NAREA website have identified themselves as following the Reggio Emilia program philosophy.
- A checklist of main tenets that were developed by Italian Reggio Emilia educators and were explained in an educational pamphlet named, 'Indications Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia' (Istituizone of the Municipality of Reggio Children, 2010) was used to determine if the data collection site implemented the main tenets of Reggio Emilia philosophy into their program.
- The data collection site was chosen in a geographic location that had at least five other early childhood program options for parents to choose from within a 30-minute driving distance.

After I researched and toured over 10 possible data collection sites in the American Midwest, Foundations Early Learning Center was chosen as the research site for the current study. The chosen data collection site was located in the American Midwest and was a Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program for 12 years.

Participants

Selected participants were parents of children who attended the Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood program, Foundations Early Learning Center. Out of 22 possible parent participants, five parents agreed to be a part of my study. The criteria for parent participants included selecting parents who chose to send their child to a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program, the Foundations Early Learning Center, and one of their children had to be enrolled in the program for at least 6 months. All five participants were white, female, were married, had a bachelor's degree, and had household incomes over \$100,000.

My data collection instrument with parents was in-depth interviews that lasted between 1 and 1.5 h each. After 2–4 weeks post interviews, transcriptions of the parent interview were given to each parent to examine to ensure for accuracy. All participants approved of their interviews that were transcribed, therefore follow-up interviews were not needed.

Results

All transcripts were coded and themes emerged into 10 main categories that were organized into 34 subcategories. A textural description was compiled that described what participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon; this process of 'textural description' described the lived experiences through verbatim examples from the parent interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Significant verbatim quotes from parent participant interviews were included in the results that were relevant to the identified themes. Results indicated that all 5-parent participants shared similar lived experiences and identified similar beneficial aspects after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program.

Themes based on research question 1

Five themes emerged from the first research question that sought to understand the lived experiences of parents whose children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest, Foundations Early Learning Center and to further understand the reasons why parents were choosing to send their children to the Reggio Emilia inspired program.

Theme 1: Research of Reggio Emilia philosophy by parents

Results displayed that all five-parent participants did not have prior knowledge of what Reggio Emilia philosophy was before they enrolled their child at Foundations Early Learning Center. Most participants conducted research to learn more about Reggio Emilia philosophy before they enrolled their child at Foundations Early Learning Center. Marshall, mother of four with one daughter enrolled in the preschool room at the time of the study, discussed her family's decision to enrol after she researched what Reggio Emilia philosophy was,

That's why we chose Foundations Early Learning Center over alternative programs because I didn't know a lot about the Reggio method. But, the only things I knew was that it was nature based and it was child led. Reggio Emilia philosophy meant nothing to me when I first was looking. I had no idea what it meant, I had no idea it was even out there. Until I did a little bit of research and studied it. Just the nature and student-led learning was enough for me to choose to enroll my daughter there.

Theme 2: Informed decision through program tours

All five participants toured alternative early childhood program options before they chose and enrolled their children at Foundations Early Learning Center. The alternative early childhood program approaches that parent participants toured included Montessori, and a traditional more structured, sit-down program approaches. Smith described her decision to choose Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center after she observed the Reggio Emilia approach in action, 'Through our tour, just watching the way that the teachers were interacting with the kids and letting them kind of set the tone sparked my interest. I started to understand the philosophy behind Reggio Emilia'.

Theme 3: Intrinsic feeling for choosing Reggio Emilia program

Participants described that after they toured Foundations Early Learning Center, they chose the program based on an intrinsic feeling that they got at the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Johnson toured a Montessori program for her son and was interested, but after she toured Foundations Early Learning Center she explained,

I walked into Foundations Early Learning Center and I said "this is home". Like just the overall feeling of it. I really did not have a lot of knowledge about what Reggio Emilia was. When I went to the Montessori school, it felt a little colder kind of and I know it's kind of a similar philosophy, but it just seemed cold to me. Where Foundations Early Learning Center seemed so loving and nurturing.

Theme 4: Chose against a non-constructivist-based approach

Participants described that despite societal pressures to choose a more traditional, non-constructivist approach to early childhood education for their children participants found more value in choosing the alternative constructivist-based Reggio Emilia approach. Johnson explained that she felt the pressure from society to choose an academically focused early childhood program for her child. Despite the pressure, Johnson chose a Reggio Emilia program over a traditional option,

I think that's what I was really drawn to was the whole idea that it's not worksheets, like that was very important to me. I think that just a traditional worksheet is not how my son is going to process learning. It was kind of a leap of faith because it goes against a lot of what society wants to tell us about how children should be learning. I think every child needs the Reggio Emilia form of learning.

Theme 5: Satisfaction for choosing a Reggio Emilia program over alternatives

All five-parent participants had at least one child who attended Foundations Early Learning Center for a minimum of six months. Participants identified a deep satisfaction for choosing a Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative program options. Smith described the satisfaction and benefits for choosing the Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program for her two children. One of Smith's children attended Foundations Early Learning Center for two years and was at the time of the interview enrolled in kindergarten while her daughter was enrolled in the preschool program at Foundations Early Learning Center,

Attending the Reggio Emilia program helped my son, who is in kindergarten now, develop more. It kind of expanded what we already saw in him. He was already real inquisitive and stuff, but I think it gave him much more space to explore. I think that he may have been a little bit more reserved if he did not attend this program. He might not have been as willing to take risks. I think that's definitely helping him in kindergarten now. His kindergarten teacher says, "He wants to know. He asks and he explores and learns and he is asking the other kids in his class really tough questions to promote their learning". The Reggio Emilia program takes the thing that my kids already have internally and intrinsically and then gives them space and an opportunity to build and explore. If my children would have been in a real traditional space, I don't know that they would ever have that opportunity to do that.

Themes based on research question 2

Research question two investigated what parents felt their children gained from being enrolled in a constructivist-based, Reggio Emilia inspired program in the American Midwest. Results of the current study displayed that parents indicated associated benefits for their children in holistic terms that aligned with the values of Reggio Emilia philosophy. Ten main themes emerged from results of the parent participant's interviews.

Theme 1: Access to creative opportunities

One aspect of Reggio Emilia philosophy that was identified as a perceived benefit from parent participants was the value educators in the Reggio Emilia inspired program placed on providing opportunities for their children to be creative. Johnson explained one benefit of her son enrolled at the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the focus on creative learning, 'I feel like there is so much creative learning and like a whole other side of my son is coming out that maybe wouldn't have in a traditional setting'. The one hundred languages of children was a term that Reggio Emilia infant, toddler, and preschool programs in Italy were founded on. Smith explained the integration of the one hundred languages in many aspects of learning at Foundations Early Learning Center,

My daughter is making mud-pies, there's music playing almost every morning when we come in, and there are dance parties. The children can swing while they paint on a big piece of paper on the ground. They take bottles of paint and they let the kids swing and paint. There are a lot of creative outlets for the children.

In the Italian Reggio Emilia early childhood programs, the inclusion of an atelier is a significant part of the children's daily lives (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005). Smith described a studio space in one of the rooms at Foundations Early Learning Center, 'They have one room inside the school that has become the studio space. A teacher will bring some kids in there and they will do self-portraits or constructive play or other creative project work'. Marshall also described the inclusion of the art studio at Foundations Early Learning Center,

They have an art studio. They use paint and any type of material to do with art. There is everything there, any type of material you can think of. They give the children the materials and let them do what they want with it. The children move through the process and create what they want. Whatever the children are thinking about or have an idea about. So there is a lot of learning about different aspects of art.

Theme 2: Individualized care and learning

One aspect of Reggio Emilia inspired programs that parents identified as one associated benefit was the attention educators took to individualize care and learning. The educators in Reggio Emilia programs tailored learning by setting individual goals for each child. Marshall explained how the individualized care was implemented at Foundations Early Learning Center, 'The teachers have expectations, but they are different for every student. They make individualized goals for each student. The teachers make sure every child is taken care of and is progressing on their individualized goals'. One identified benefit from Johns of the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the individualized care given from the educators, 'It's more in-depth. It's more taking my child as an individual and not just as a group'.

Theme 3: Interest, inquiry, and project-based learning

The learning approaches implemented in Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center were interest, inquiry, and project-based. Johnson described one identified benefit of her child after she attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program at Foundations Early Learning Center was how curriculum was constructed based on individual interests and inquires of the children in the classroom,

The approach to learning is child-directed. I think it's amazing when the kids will grab onto an idea and the educators take it as far as they possibly can. That's amazing to me. I think it is amazing for the teachers and that's a lot more work than just handing out a worksheet.

Michaels agreed with Johnson because the curriculum in the Reggio Emilia inspired program was not repeated, theme-based, or generic. Instead, it was carefully designed based on the individual students in the classrooms, 'It is not a curriculum that they use every single year for every kid that comes through'. Marshall explained that the way the educators involved students in the creation of curriculum in the Reggio Emilia program was another associated benefit, 'The children come up with some of the ideas and there's not a set we have to get this done today curriculum'. Johns also pointed out that Reggio Emilia approach to education was an associated benefit, 'In my mind when you say Reggio Emilia all I think is that it is impressive. The way that they work with my child is different than a standard curriculum'.

Reggio Emilia programs followed children's interests and tailored learning to the individuals in the classrooms. Johns identified one associated benefit of her daughter after she attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program was how Foundations Early Learning Center followed a project-based approach to learning, 'The approach at Foundation's Early Learning Center is more interest-based. And it is project-based. It is more authentic the way teachers do curriculum here rather than just to give students something out of the binder'. Smith explained the benefit she found in project-based learning as in Reggio Emilia, even with her education and background in public education. Smith found deep value in a project-based approach to learning for her children at Foundations Early Learning Center,

The Reggio Emilia program does project-based things that are really interesting to the kids because it's something they can relate to. It's letting the children explore and be who they are and expand on their interests. It's not just "here's a piece of paper". So, it is starting where the children are and then expanding from there. They are doing a house project currently in the preschool room. The teachers asked parents to turn in pictures of everyone's home and brought them in the classroom to share. They talked about what a home is and what to do in a home and what the rooms are in a home. That's a really big project-based thing that they've done this year that is really interesting to the kids because it's something they can relate to.

Theme 4: Communication and making learning visible through documentation

Documentation is viewed as a vital part of communication with families, children, and the school community in Reggio Emilia programs. All parents articulated that communication between families and educators with documentation being the cornerstone of the program was an advantage. One-way Foundations Early Learning Centers communicated daily experiences in the classroom through documentation was with daily learning stories. Learning stories at Foundations Early Learning Center provided daily documentation through text and pictures that were sent electronically to parents that described specific details of what individual classrooms were engaged in each day. Johnson explained one benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program was the daily documentation of the learning stories that parents were given, 'Every single day we got documentation. The learning stories they send home were great with pictures and quotes from kids. It is wonderful.'

Theme 5: Classroom environment and choice of materials

From parent participants, the intentional classroom environment and choice of materials were identified as one associated benefit of their children after they attended the Reggio Emilia inspired program. In Reggio Emilia programs, educators created classroom environments with the intentional choice of materials, aesthetics, and space arrangements that were unique to the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Part of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is that materials are offered to children intentionally and purposefully. Typical materials found in Reggio Emilia classrooms include natural and recycled materials that are open-ended such as metal rings, flower petals, blocks, pinecones, seashells, and clay (Bond, 2015; New, 1989). Marshall identified the selection of purposeful materials offered to children at Foundations Early Learning Center as one associated benefit, 'There are different materials that the children can use in play that are unique. Materials such as natural materials and materials specific to projects the children are doing. They bring in sand and rocks and pumpkins.' Marshall further described how educators in the Reggio Emilia inspired program offered materials as part of the classroom environment, 'The teachers give children time to play, explore, test, and see what the materials are before telling them how to use it. The materials are open-ended but the children naturally end up being creative with them.'

Theme 6: Educators approach to teaching

Educators in Reggio Emilia programs typically approach teaching differently than in a traditional, teacher-directed preschool program. Participants articulated the approach educators used in the Reggio Emilia inspired classrooms at Foundations Early Learning Center as beneficial for their children. Smith described the approach educators used in Foundations Early Learning Center classrooms, 'The teachers kind of guide the children's learning and interact, but not always. I see the teachers more as facilitators of learning instead of directors. The teachers guide the children, but also let them explore'. Another aspect of teaching in Reggio Emilia programs is the value placed on continuing education and professional development of the staff. All five parent participants acknowledged the benefit that educators at the Reggio Emilia inspired program were committed to professional development opportunities, further expanding their knowledge and abilities in their children's classrooms.

Theme 7: Viewing children as capable

Parent participants identified one associated benefit of their children enrolled at Foundations Early Learning Reggio Emilia inspired program for how educators viewed their children as capable. One of the overarching values of Reggio Emilia practice is how educators view children as capable, with profound respect given to each child. Smith identified the way educators spoke with children at Foundations Early Learning Center showed that the educators viewed children as capable, 'Teachers speak with children in the most respectful way'. One aspect of Reggio Emilia philosophy that was part of the day-to-day practice at Foundations Early Learning Center was the educators trusted children in their physical capabilities and gave children opportunities to take risks. Smith recognized the benefit of children being given opportunities to take physical risks, 'The teachers explain why it is important to take risks. When your child jumps off that rock it will help them to be more brave and not be afraid to try something new'.

Theme 8: Authentic relationships and social-emotional development

Parent participants identified the value placed on building authentic relationships and supporting social-emotional development in children as one associated benefit of the Reggio Emilia inspired program. Marshall explained one benefit for her daughter being enrolled at a Reggio Emilia inspired program was the value the program placed on building social relationships for children,

My daughter has completely developed self-confidence from coming here. She's got the social skills now and has blossomed. I wanted my daughter to be compassionate, to be kind to people, to have friends, to have very strong relationships with others and that is what they do at Foundations Early Learning Center. My daughter will have a solid foundation when she leaves here.

Parent participants also described how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center supported healthy emotional development through supporting and honouring all emotions.

Theme 9: Constructivist-based learning: learn through doing

At Foundations Early Learning Center, a constructivist-based foundation like in Reggio Emilia philosophy is implemented. One identified benefit from parents of the Reggio Emilia inspired Foundations Early Learning Center was that children had the opportunity to actively participate in their own learning. Smith described her interpretation of how Foundations Early Learning Center fostered constructivist-based learning with the children, 'It's not just "here's a piece of paper and write an A". It's making meaning and building upon those ideas that the children already have, explaining that knowledge, and bringing it to another form through action.' Johnson gave examples of how educators at Foundations Early Learning Center have integrated an active approach to learning, 'I love that children write in the sand with pipe cleaners, mould letters with their hands, use their bodies to move. The teachers integrate the learning into doing'.

Theme 10: Nature and outside classroom experiences

Reggio Emilia programs in Italy are known for the integration of learning outside the classroom walls with offering daily outdoor opportunities for children. Foundations Early Learning Center followed the Reggio Emilia philosophy by extending the classroom to the outdoors for children daily. At Foundations Early Learning Center, a large aspect of the children's classroom experiences was centred on the access and availability to a state recreation area within walking distance from the school. The state recreation area was a sanctuary for nature experiences that included a pond, trees, living animals, and insects. Nature walks were embedded into the daily practice and curriculum at Foundations Early Learning Center. The integration of nature and outdoor experiences into the everyday learning at Foundations Early Learning Center was very important to Smith,

I don't think that my daughter would have cared about rocks or animals or the bugs on the ground. After she attended Foundations Early Learning Center, she is very attuned to all that nature stuff. Being outside and being a part of nature and having that integrated into the curriculum was just huge for both my husband and I. The director was talking about nature being another teacher. I was like, "that is exactly it. This is how kids learn. A natural way of learning".

Discussion

It was the intention of the current research to bring awareness of the advantages to a non-traditional, constructivist-based, developmentally appropriate, early childhood educational approach in the context of the United States. The Reggio Emilia philosophy differs from traditional, non-constructivist early childhood programs because Reggio Emilia philosophy was centred around viewing children as rich in potential, competent, and included children's theories in their day-to-day learning (Fyfe, 2011; McNally & Slutsky, 2017). Results from the current study concluded that all parent participants had a deep satisfaction for the non-traditional Reggio Emilia early childhood approach for their children. Results may provide policymakers, educators, childcare centres, parents, and early childhood advocates the evidence for the positive advantages of implementing non-traditional, Reggio Emilia philosophy into early childhood programs in the United States.

All five-parent participants shared similar lived experiences and identified similar beneficial aspects after their children attended a Reggio Emilia inspired program. Overall, parent participant's confirmed similar results for advantages after choosing to send their child to a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program. Findings of the current study have the possibility to extend knowledge in the field of early childhood education related to Reggio Emilia philosophy in the United States. Results shared in the current study have the power to bring awareness of how educators in an early childhood program in the American Midwest have had success implementing the Italian Reggio Emilia philosophy into their classrooms. Results of the current study represent lived experiences of parents who chose a Reggio Emilia inspired program over alternative options for their children. Within the results, parents identified the core foundational tenets of Reggio Emilia pedagogy as a valuable choice for the approach to early childhood education for their children.

Reggio Emilia advantage: constructivist-based

The vision of children as active participants in their own education is the foundational idea of constructivism and the base of Reggio Emilia philosophy. Data collected from the current study indicated that parents were in favour of a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program because it gave children opportunities to be active participants in their education. One value that was integrated from educators in the constructivist-based Reggio Emilia program was the inclusion of children as active participants and constructors in their learning (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). In Reggio Emilia programs, children are given opportunities to be involved in the process of learning because children were viewed as having rights as citizens of the world (Bond, 2015; New, 1989; Schneider et al., 2014; Swann, 2008). Part of the foundation of constructivism and Reggio Emilia pedagogy lies in the importance of listening to children in order to create a democratic and supportive learning climate and was identified from parents in the current study as one benefit (Zorec, 2015). Parents from the current study described the strategies for how educators implemented constructivism in the classroom through following children's interests in the creation of classroom projects, how educators viewed children as capable, and how classrooms were designed with the inclusion of ateliers and materials that honoured the individual strengths of all children.

With the intention to specifically examine how constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood program instilled advantages in children from the parents perspective was explored in the current study. Ample evidence supports an interactive, developmentally appropriate, play-based approach to early childhood programs as in Reggio Emilia programs (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer,

2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). Results of the current study displayed a high level of satisfaction for parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired program, Foundations Early Learning Center, over alternative program options for their children in the American Midwest. One major implication of the current study that could be implied through the results was that parents identified that their young children learned through an active participatory approach to education. Parents explained that when children were seen as capable and were given opportunities to be involved in their education, children thrived. Reggio Emilia, a constructivist-based early childhood philosophy that originated in Northern Italy, proved to be an excellent model to facilitate optimum learning in young children. The early childhood programs that were created in Reggio Emilia, Italy in the 1940s took the opposite method of a traditional educational approach.

Limitations

One limitation related to the demographics of the participants in the study was that all 5 participants were white, of higher socio-economic status, and had completed at minimum a bachelor's degree in education displaying a lack of diversity in ethnicity, socio-economic status, and education level. Foundations Early Learning Center was tuition based and may have excluded families who were not able to financially afford to enrol their children in the program. As many Reggio Emilia inspired programs in the United States are privately owned and tuition-based, accessibility for families of lower income levels can sometimes be limited (Smith, 2014). It is important to note that the chosen data collection site, Foundations Early Learning Center, did not offer scholarships or discounts for families of lower-socioeconomic status.

Indications for future research

Results from the current study indicated a need for further investigations that included one area of future research to examine how children transition from a Reggio Emilia inspired program into a traditional, public school kindergarten. Four out of five parent participants of the current study were concerned for how their children would transition from a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia inspired preschool program philosophy into a traditional, non-constructivist-based public school educational philosophy for kindergarten. Parents, educators, policymakers, and those people who are invested in early childhood education may benefit from future research that would focus on the transition from a Reggio Emilia program into a public school kindergarten. With ample research displaying results for early childhood programs that are interactive, and play-based, it is vital to preserve and advocate for an educational philosophy in early childhood that supports and benefits children's natural way of learning. It is my hope that results of the current research will provide support for implementation of the constructivist-based, interactive model from Reggio Emilia educational philosophy into more early childhood programs throughout the United States.

Conclusion

Early childhood education is in a state of crisis in the United States as standardized testing in elementary public schools have been pushed down onto expectations in preschools that are not developmentally appropriate (Apple, 2008; Christakis, 2016; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). With ample research displaying results for early childhood programs that are interactive, and play-based, it is vital to preserve and advocate for an educational philosophy in early childhood that supports and benefits children's natural way of learning. It is my hope that results of the current research will provide support for implementation of the constructivist-based, interactive model from Reggio Emilia educational philosophy into more early childhood programs throughout the United States.

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In my first college human development course, I recall the stories of research conducted on babies living in Romanian orphanages of something I will never forget. The outcome of these studies displayed malnourishment, neglect, and resulted in severe cognitive, social, emotional, and physical delays of young children who lived there. Caregivers lacked the ability to love, nurture, and give appropriate care to the children that they needed in order to thrive. The influence of these early studies and with God's direction, I have been given a strong desire to complete my doctorate in order to bring awareness of the impact that early experiences have on children's lives. Thank you to all of the early childhood professionals who have dedicated their time to create change in the field. To my professors, especially Dr. Helen Hagens from Central Michigan University, who spurred a love for early childhood in me from the beginning. Thank you to my colleagues over the years: Roxy Greenspan and my colleagues at Google Children's Centers who I felt honoured to learn alongside of. Thank you to my dear friend, Silvia Ferguson, who did nothing but encourage me.

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Disclosure statement

The aim of the current doctoral study was to bring awareness to others of perceived benefits and overall lived experiences of parents who chose a constructivist-based Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy over alternative program options for their children in the American Midwest. Results from the current study indicated the approval from parents who chose a Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy for their children. Parent participants in the current study explained that part of their satisfaction for choosing the Reggio Emilia inspired program for their children was because the philosophy honoured children's capabilities and included children as active participants in their education. The integration and expansion of Reggio Emilia philosophy into more early childhood programs in the United States has the potential to result in developmentally appropriate, beneficial, valuable, and joyous learning experiences for young children and their families.

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