THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF CHILD AND YOUTH PROGRAM ASSISTANTS (CYPAs) AT A MILITARY INSTALLATION

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my friends and family.
THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF CHILD AND YOUTH PROGRAM ASSISTANTS (CYPAs) AT A MILITARY INSTALLATION

by

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This six-month long phenomenological case study seeks to add to the body of literature regarding the impact of learning on the construction of professional identities for early childhood care and education professionals by drawing on sociocultural theories of learning and identities. Specifically, this study explores how nine Child and Youth Program Assistants’ (CYPAs) professional identities construction was impacted by their personal and professional learning experiences. The study was conducted in the Southwestern region of the U.S. at Quartz CDC (QCDC) located on Ft. Gem Military Installation where the CYPAs were employed as early childhood professionals.

The analysis of multiple data sources revealed CYPAs’ personal and professional learning experiences impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals when it was social and occurred in context. It was also revealed that as CYPAs shared personal experiences with learning, families served as sources of recruitment for becoming members of the “figured world” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of early childhood professionals. Learning experiences such as babysitting, volunteering, and being a part of a family were activities that enabled CYPAs to gain skills they later used as early childhood professionals. Lastly, as CYPAs talked about professional learning experiences it was found that while they valued various approaches to professional learning, they viewed these approaches as existing on a continuum.

The findings of this study have implications for policy and the field of early childhood care and education as well as for research and practice related to the professional learning and identity construction of early childhood professionals.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over recent years there have been major changes in the political, economic, and social context of early childhood education. According to the Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD, 2009), there are approximately two million children in the United States ages 6 weeks to 6 years that attend formal, licensed childcare, while on the other hand there are several million in the care of unlicensed babysitters and or caretakers. As societies continuously evolve, cultural and societal changes also play a major part in the changing and development of early childhood care and education (Vlasov & Hujala, 2016). Although there have been recent efforts such as the Obama-Biden “Zero-to-Five” plan to improve and increase the overall quality of early care and education, in addition to an overall increase in awareness of the connections between children’s positive development and high-quality care, studies reveal that there are still many children in poor quality child care settings (Becker, 2013; Elicker, Ruprecht, & Anderson, 2014; Lally, 2013). This insinuates that there are some children experiencing a poorer quality of care than others, and it also opens the possibility that there are some young children being subjected to conditions that could jeopardize their overall well-being and development (Cryer, Hurwitz, & Wolery, 2000; Henson, 2014; Hillemeier, Morgan, Farkas, & Maczuga, 2013; Kopas-Vukasinovic, 2012). Indeed, there are multiple levels and components that need to be considered in the discussion of improving the overall quality in early childhood care and education. One key component is the urgent need to focus on better preparing professionals in early childhood to provide high-quality and responsive caregiving in a variety of early childhood care and education settings (Lee, Shin, & Recchia, 2016).

One attempt to facilitate the improved quality of care has been through the implementation of policies focused on early childhood care and education. t. Federal and state policies involving the improvement of quality for early childhood care and education, while
seemingly well intentioned, often tend to be separated from the realities, truths, and experiences of the very practitioners they directly impact. For example, Rachel Demma (2010), a senior policy analyst for the NGA Center for Best Practices, reports in an executive summary that in order to improve the profession as well as the overall quality of early childhood education and care, all members of the profession should possess specialized knowledge of how young children grow, develop, and learn. The issue brief, however, places a great deal of focus on professionals gaining the needed specialized knowledge solely through credentialing at two- and four-year colleges and universities. While the NGA’s emphasis on degree credentialing is important, research in the area of professional learning also highlights the value of learning in situated contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lee & Shaari, 2012; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

While federal and state level policy perspectives may view degree attainment for early childhood providers as ideal and possible for all individuals, I argue that what professionals need to know is important, but what is just as important is that attention is paid to how individuals come to learn and acquire these specialized skills, practices, and knowledges associated with the field and practice of early childhood care and education. There seems to be a gap between what is being discussed and put into effect as policy and what is actually happening in the field of early childhood care and education among practitioners. The goal of policy is to influence acting or not acting in particular ways in regards to specific situations. Sociocultural theories call attention to and focus on the manner actions of individuals are shaped by their social interactions, peer collaborations, and work. Research with network perspectives concerned with the implementation of policy (Coburn, 2016; Coburn, Russell, et al., 2012; Frank & Zhao, 2004) explore how individuals’ social relationships and membership of social groups impacts what they
learn about, as well as respond to policy that directly affects them. To better understand this gap, my research explored the personal and professional learning experiences of early childhood professionals in order to complicate the policy discourses around early childhood care and education, which tend to emphasize decontextualized and individualized learning over learning in context.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study addressed this gap by exploring the personal and professional learning experiences of Child and Youth Program Assistants (CYPAs) (early childhood professionals working in the CDCs on a military installation) in order to understand how they constructed their professional identities as early childhood professionals. Drawing on phenomenological methodologies that emphasized care and ethics, this research drew attention to the importance of self-awareness, reflection, and the creation of a safe space for early childhood educators to share their stories and experiences. This process, in turn, served as a way to acknowledge and include their own voices in conversations about learning and the construction of their identities as professionals in the field of childcare/early childhood education.

**Positionality and Origins of the Study**

As I conducted this phenomenological case study of early childhood professionals’ professional identities constructions, one of my main concerns was being sure to engage in an ongoing process of reflection on how my own identities and background was similar to or different from the participants in this study. Continuously reflecting on those issues was key for the duration of the study, but more so during the analysis and interpretation of data, the stages in which qualitative researchers become more concerned with issues of personal bias, power relations, and representation. While I was aware that these issues were ever-present, as a way to
consciously attend to them I chose to use journaling as a tool for my own awareness and acknowledgement of these issues.

As the researcher, I brought to the study over 15 years of experience working in some shape, form, or fashion in the field of early childhood education and care. The last 6 of those years were connected to child development centers (CDC) on a military installation, which served as the context of this study. My initial involvement with the CDC was as a spouse of a military service-member and parent of a child that attended one of the five CDCs on post. I later, became a parent volunteer and member of the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) as a classroom representative. As I continued to volunteer with the CDC, I eventually applied and was offered a job as the center’s Training and Curriculum Specialist (TACS).

My professional background and experiences at the CDC was one of the main reasons for selecting the military installation as a research site. As I reflected on my transition from being a parent, an outsider, to a TACS, a member of the military child development center, I initially struggled with constructing my own professional identity. As the TACS, I spent the majority of my workdays, and often times my weekends, with CYPAs engaging in various professional learning activities and experiences. It was during these times that I was made aware of the various perspectives, our own as well as others, regarding who we were as professionals. As I grappled with who I was and how I constructed my own professional identity, I also became curious if CYPAs, the very people that I worked so closely with, had similar struggles. As time passed and I engaged in more of the work of a TACS, I began reconstructing my own professional identity. It was also during this time that I wanted to know the ways in which others in this setting constructed their professional identities. Working at Quartz CDC privileged me to an insider view of the day to day workings, activities, learning, and relationships that occurred in
this unique setting. My previous professional background as well as being the TACS for two years allowed me to step back and engage with the overall structure of a military child development center. On the other hand, being away from the CDC also allowed me to step-back, and from different positions have varied perspectives as I explored how CYPAs constructed their own professional identities in a military context.

**Research Questions**

The interest in research on early childhood professionals, professional learning, and professional identities was sparked from my many informal and formal conversations with early childhood professionals while working as a Training and Curriculum Specialist (TACS) for the Department of Defense (DOD) on a military installation, prior to and during my doctoral studies. The main research question that drove my study was: How do Child and Youth Program Assistants (CYPAs) on a military installation construct their professional identities as early childhood professionals? There were also two sub-questions in my research:

- What personal learning experiences impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities?
- What professional learning experiences impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities?

**Significance of the Study**

Although early childhood professionals have been studied many times in the past (Brown, Castle, Rogers, Feuerhelm, & Chimblo, 2007; Rodd & Clyde, 1990; Kremenitzer & Miller, 2003; Langford, 2008; Osgood, 2009), scholarly conversations concerning the current shift in political and academic focus on early childhood education often times leave out early childhood educators. These conversations need to be reopened (Cuban, 2009) and space made for the voice of early childhood educators in various contexts. Early childhood professionals
deserve and need to become the focus of more research studies as a way to first be recognized as a key component in the education of children as well as to understand and develop their essential role in the field of education.

Allowing early childhood professionals the opportunities to share their experiences, stories, and ideas strengthens the profession and ultimately helps children. When early childhood professionals are able to reflect on how they see themselves as professionals and be explicit about how they learn and construct themselves as early childhood professionals, it allows them to improve their views of the profession and their roles, as well as provides guidance and implications for policymakers to consider as they work to improve the overall quality of early childhood care and education. When teachers are aware of their own learning and are able to feel good about who they are as professionals, children also benefit. Teachers are more apt to do a better job at providing children with engaging activities and meaningful learning experiences. For this study, I selected to focus on CYPAs at CDCs because like teachers in formal school settings, they were responsible for providing children with engaging activities and learning experiences that were challenging and meaningful. It was my hope that the findings of this study would shed light and place focus on the rethinking and consideration of how CYPAs on military installations across the world experience learning, professional development/training, and construction their professional identities.

Additionally, what is missing from the literature is research that is concerned with the identity construction of early childhood professionals. While there has been a great deal of research that explores the learning and professional identity construction of educators in formal school settings (Day, 2012; Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Olsen, 2008) there seems to be less attention in the literature that addresses learning and the identity
construction of early childhood practitioners. This study is significant because it addresses early childhood professionals learning and their identity construction by exploring their personal and professional learning in a manner that treats it as more than the notion of learning by doing; this study provided exploration of the ways in which my participants fully took part and engaged in being early childhood professionals and constructed meaning in the context of one military child development center (CDC). While individual’s identities are constructed in many ways, this study focused on learning as one of those ways.

**Definition of Terms**

**Early Childhood Care and Education** – Refers to education of children age 0-8 years of age occurring in conjunction with the whole child, including but not limited to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth and development. This education is not limited to the school day or setting, but occurs as the child explores and engages the world around them (National Association Education of Young Children (NAEYC)).

**Child Development Center (CDC)**- Department of Defense (DOD). The DOD oversees over 800 Child Development Centers (CDCs) on military installation worldwide. These centers offer a safe child care environment and meet professional standards for early childhood education. Child care is typically available through these centers for children ages six weeks to twelve years. The centers are generally open Monday through Friday between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 p.m., and some installations have centers with extended hours or centers that are open around the clock. Fees for child care centers vary by service and year, so check with your on-base childcare office for the most up to date fee charts (Ft. Gem Military Child Development Centers”, n. d.).
**Child and Youth Program Assistant (CYPAs)** - Child /Youth Development Program Assistants are responsible for a group or class of children who may range in age from 6 weeks to 18 years. Staff may work in a variety of settings within the child development center (CDC) or school age program on a military installation. Positions are available on entry, intermediate, and full performance levels. According to Ft. Gem Military Child Development Centers” (n. d.) specific duties and qualifications may vary by level, service, and location, but primary responsibilities may include:

- Preparing lesson plans and implementing program activities that support children’s physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development
- Maintaining control of, and accounting for, the whereabouts and safety of children & youth
- Assisting in providing and leading planned activities for program participants
- Establishing an environment which promotes positive child and youth interactions with peers and adults
- Supervising children and youth during daily schedule of indoor and outdoor activities, on field trips, outings, and special events

The most highly qualified candidates will have:

- A high school diploma or GED and be at least 18 years old
- Relevant prior experience is preferred

**Military Installation** - base, camp, post, station, yard, center, or other activity under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of a Military Department or, in the case of an activity in a foreign country, under the operational control of the Secretary of a Military Department or the Secretary of Defense.

**Training and Curriculum Specialist (TACS)** - individual that may work with multiple populations of children and staff. They are responsible for coordinating and delivering training,
overseeing the program’s curriculum, and ensuring that the program achieves/maintains national accreditation. According to Ft. Gem Military Child Development Centers” (n. d.). specific duties and qualifications may vary, but primary responsibilities may include:

- Providing and delivering a comprehensive training program to child development and/or school-age program employees and family child care/child development home providers
- Assisting with implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum/programming
- Serving as the principal liaison for the national accreditation process

The most highly qualified candidates will have:

- A degree from a 4-year college or university in early childhood education
- At least 3 years of related experience

OR

- A master’s degree in a related field
- At least 1 year of related experience

**Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. The research questions and purpose have been described and discussed in chapter one. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework, which is informed by the following sociocultural theories of learning and identity construction: communities of practice, situated learning, apprenticeship, and figured worlds. In this chapter, I also review relevant literature on professional identities and learning for early childhood educators, and professional development and learning for early childhood educators. In chapter 3, I describe the methodology used in this study and justify my choice for a qualitative research design with a phenomenological case study approach. I also describe the procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.
In chapter 4 and 5, I present my analysis of data. Chapter 4 explores participants’ personal learning experiences. The chapter provides an illustration of how participants’ personal experiences of being a part of a family, babysitting, and volunteering impacted the construction of their professional identities. Chapter 5 explores participants’ professional experiences. The chapter provides definitions to various approaches to professional learning as well as offers a picture of how participants’ viewed approaches to professional learning as spaces on a continuum as opposed to viewing them as opposing forces. The chapter also includes how participants’ professional learning experiences impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals. Chapter 6 is the final chapter. The chapter includes a discussion of the main findings and concludes with implications for the field, practice, policy, and future research.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework that informed my understanding of how CYPAs constructed their identities as early childhood professionals. Since my focus was the connections between CYPAs’ personal and professional learning experiences and the construction of their professional identities, I utilized theories with sociocultural perspectives. The three perspectives I used were: 1. figured worlds; 2. situated learning in communities of practice; and 3. apprenticeship. Rooted in the view of learning and identities as social practices and processes, these theories assisted me as I examined learning as a situated practice and process that impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities. Each one of these theories that make-up the theoretical framework of this study are discussed in the following sections. Following the theoretical framework is a review of literature on professional identities and learning for early childhood educators, and professional development and learning for early childhood educators.

Theoretical Framework

If one of the aims of early childhood policy is to focus on better preparing professionals in early childhood to provide high-quality and responsive caregiving in a variety of early childhood care and education settings, then attention must be paid to the learning and development of practitioners that share the tasks and responsibilities of providing care and education to children. According to Mouza (2006), “The key objective of professional development is to alter teacher professional knowledge and classroom practice in order to produce higher student achievement” (p. 406). Researchers assert that simply participating in professional development does not necessarily result in high quality care or teacher learning (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Laferriere,
Lamon, and Chan (2006) assert that “deep teacher learning does not come from one shot training courses with experts transmitting de-contextualized knowledge to teachers” (p. 77-78). Marbina, Church, and Tayler (2012) assert in order to measure quality and learning one must look at the evidence of change and enhanced pedagogical reflection on practice. Minimal improvements in student learning can be expected if professional development workshops are attended but do not produce a change in teacher identity, knowledge, or practice (Guskey, 2002). An overall improvement in the quality of early childhood education will continue to be unseen if there remains to be little focus placed on the leaning and development of early childhood education practitioners. Until more research is conducted that places early childhood practitioners and the ways in which they learn and construct their professional identities front and center, there will be a continuous outpouring of ineffective professional development mandates and policies that leave out practitioners, all in the name of quality improvement. As a way to navigate and make sense of how CYPAs’ learning impacted the construction of their professional identities as early childhood professionals, I relied on the following theories: figured worlds, apprenticeship, communities of practice, and situated learning. The use of this particular set of theories was important in calling attention to the social aspect involved in learning. These theories were also beneficial in that they enabled learning to be seen from a perspective of engagement and participation in social practices and processes. In combination, they also illustrated how learning is one way in which CYPSs’ self-authored themselves and acted out their identities within the specific context of the CDC.

**Figured Worlds**

Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain (1998) define figured worlds as “socially produced culturally constituted activities where people come to perform/produce new identities
of themselves conceptually (cognitively) as well as materially (procedurally)” (p. 40). In addition, Holland et al. (1998) “contend that figured worlds are socially and culturally constructed realms of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents […] who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state […] as moved by a specific set of forces …” (p. 52). This notion of figured worlds is not an independent idea; rather, it is a part of a larger theory of self and identity. Figured worlds are also a sociocultural practice theory of identity and of the self that focuses on identities forming in practice, action, activity, and in real time. Urietta (2007) explains that because worlds are organized and performed in a social way these worlds are dependent upon the interaction and intersubjectivity of the participants in order to be carried out and sustained.

Using Holland et al.’s (1998) sociocultural practice theory of identity and self, I focused on CYPAs’ identities forming in process or activity. It helped me to understand how CYPAs’ construction of their professional identities in this study were a part of a cultural phenomenon where they were socially and culturally constructed realms. Holland et al.’s (1998) theory of figured worlds also served as a resource to explore the construction of early childhood professionals’ identities in ways that went beyond the arbitrary assigning of labels. Figured worlds aided in understanding the complexity involved in the forming and reforming of how early childhood professionals viewed themselves in the social contexts of the CDC located on a military installation. Most importantly, it contributed to a better understanding of identity/self-construction, beyond a static notion of identity. The theory of figured worlds was useful in making sense of how CYPAs’ identities were cultural productions; they were fluid, interactive
and the way in which they were understood changed over time. Figured worlds provided a means for understanding CYPAs as people, and the structures, context, actions, and practices associated with the CDC as a social and cultural activity and context for activity.

**Situated Learning in Communities of Practice**

Wenger (1998) explains that it is through learning that identity is produced. This social aspect of learning places focus on the individual as a social participant, as a meaning maker that utilizes the world as a resource for producing a particular identity. The individual using themselves completely, body, heart, mind, relationships, all parts of their human experiences are part of the process of negotiating meaning. The overall experience of an individual in each of these areas serve as intricate and active components utilized though learning. A key point that Wenger (1998) explains is that learning is more than simply the acquisition of skills and information; it also includes individuals actually becoming a certain person, an individual that is knowledgeable in a particular context one that knows the rules, as well as how to negotiate and operate in a particular community. Wenger (1998) main purpose is to bring attention to the concept that even in work that may seem mundane, rote, and unskilled there is a great deal of meaning-making and interaction in accomplishing the tasks associated with the jobs.

Communities of practice allowed for the consideration of CYPAs as a group and individual identities that emphasized specific learning and development in relation to who they were as a group of early childhood professionals concerned with bettering the education and care for young children at the CDC. Wenger (1998) asserts that in order for a group to make up a community of practice it must exhibit mutual engagement in a particular task, a collective effort to reach a common goal(s) as well as possession of a shared repertoire among members in meaning making and expression. This framework provided valuable insight in understanding
and making sense of the experiences, feelings, values and overall information shared by CYPAs concerning their professional identities as well as personal and professional learning experiences.

Communities of practice are created by groups of people that participate in a process of collective and collaborative learning in a shared domain. Communities of practice are clusters of people that share a concern/interest/passion for something they do and learn to improve upon through regular interaction (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2000). Simply because something is called a “community” does not automatically mean it is a true community of practice. This approach aids in the identification of learning that is authentic, motivated, and contextualized. Cognitive models of learning generally are characterized as being concerned with teaching, occurring in classroom settings, preset and predetermined learning outcomes, and the transmission and absorption of information (Ausubel, 1978; Bruner, 1960; Gagne, 1985). In contrast to cognitive models of learning, situated models of learning focus on the contextualization of learning, use of observations as peripheral participation (the way new members become experienced members and eventually veteran members of a community), being driven by tasks, and are concerned with understanding how participants behave. Situated learning also addresses changes in participants’ identities, which challenges the notion that identities are rote, mechanical and focused on simple transmission and absorption of information associated with cognitive learning (Cox, 2007). The change of identities occurs as members of the community learn they are also becoming; the tasks and activities that they participate in to gain knowledge is a major part of who that individual is becoming. The actual knowledge and the knower are not separate; in turn, the actual practice also plays a role in the changes members’ experience.

Perspectives that have emerged from anthropology provide views of learning as existing through the connections and relations that exist among individuals in particular contexts and in
their interaction with others. This is different from cognitive views that explain that learning is more of an individualistic task where knowledge is in one individual’s head. Situated learning in communities of practice serves as a tool to address and challenge the decontextualized and problematic manner in which policy proposes to improve the overall quality of the field of early childhood care and education, which emphasizes degree attainment for early childhood providers as a means for improving the profession and the overall quality of early childhood education and care. From a researcher perspective, the use of situated learning in communities of practice then places me in position to approach my research in a manner that sees the learning and development of my participants as more than just learning because they are doing, and encourages me to see how my participants are fully participating and engaging in being Child and Youth Program Assistants (CYPAs) and constructing meaning.

By exploring the experiences of CYPAs as members of communities of practice I gained insight of the participants’ own experiences of practice. Using situated learning in community of practice as a lens allowed the exploration in how CYPAs engaged in learning as a social practice. Communities of practice in this setting allowed for the understanding of how early childhood professionals learned as part of social structure. By looking at this social aspect of learning insight was also provided regarding how participants use their membership of communities of practice to construct their professional identities.

Situated learning in communities of practice served as a tool to address and challenge the decontextualized and problematic manner in which policy proposes to improve the overall quality of the field of early childhood care and education. Situatedness in communities of practice concerns individuals learning while being fully engaged in a community and through that engagement they are also making meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When practitioners are
situated within the context of an early childhood center then “new knowledge and learning are properly conceived as being located in communities of practice” (Tennant, 1997, p.77). When policy addresses professional learning, development, and identity it does so where the focus is placed on the building and acquiring of knowledge individually in an institution often away from hands on practice. It promotes the urgent need for an overhaul of the field of early childhood care and education and prescribes measures that emphasize individuals taking charge and improving their own professional identities by seeking greater professional development and improvement by attending institutions of higher learning and advanced degrees.

Exploring and examining the learning that takes place among CYPAs in their social environments sheds light on how they move from being novice to experts as well as insight about how it is these professionals grow and their trajectories as they participate within the community of early childhood education. Communities of practice guided the thinking of learning as lived experiences that were tangled with social phenomenon and how individuals participate and move within social groups, communities.

**Apprenticeship**

Within situated learning, apprenticeship also served as a useful tool in identifying and understanding how CYPAs acquired the needed skills, practices, and knowledge needed to be an early childhood professional at the CDC. Apprenticeship makes obvious the social nature of learning and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 2011) such as in this unique setting where often CYPAs do not possess formal post-secondary educations. Then the question is: How is it that CYPAs know how to or learn how to be early childhood professional? Apprenticeship served as the lens that allowed the identification of CYPAs as learners being involved in a learning relationship where they actually got to see the process of work it and how it impacted and allowed for the overall learning through activities that were physical and tangible, it made
the abstract concrete (Collins, Holum, & Brown, 1991; Lave, 2011). Apprenticeship also called attention to instances of the following social interactions between the supervisor and the apprentice: modeling, coaching, and scaffolding, as three of many teaching methods used as means for learning and the discovery of knowledge (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) as it related to skill acquisition and development for early childhood professionals.

Each of these social theories of learning acted as important ingredients in the total and overall exploration of how learning impacted the construction of CYPAs professional identities construction. Each of these social theories of learning is important in that they work to challenge the presumptive, traditional, and dominant policy discourse that posits learning as an individual activity that is isolated, decontextualized, and has definite starting and stopping points.

**Policy and Quality in Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood is one of the most crucial times of development for children. It is during this time that children explore and discover the world around them. As children grow physically, mentally, social, and emotionally, it is important that they not only have access to the most basic needs of food, water and shelter, but also sound support and guidance to be healthy and progress in each area of growth and development. Childcare providers have the potential to provide true early childhood education, and they do so by attending to and caring for children’s needs in every area of growth and development. Exemplary early childhood professionals understand that a child’s intellectual growth and development are not isolated, and in order for children to be successful intellectually they must also experience positive and successful growth and development socially, emotionally, and physically (Burchinal et al., 2008; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Zaslow et al., 2010).
Research (e.g. Ampartzaki & Kalogiannakis, 2016; Patel, Corter, Pelletier, & Bertrand, 2016) has revealed work concerning children in childcare settings ages six weeks to six years and how they grow and develop cognitively. If we stop and look at children’s education in the early years we have recently seen a shift, a movement, that brings attention to debates and discussions concerning not only what children need to learn but these ideas about education for children in the early years and how they learn. Research tells us that young children learn, grow, and develop when they are provided with early experiences that are meaningful, thoughtful, social, and intentional (Layzer & Goodson, 2006; MCYS, 2011; Tough, Rikhy, Benzies, Vekved, Kehler & Johnston, 2013; Wittmer & Petersen, 2009). The first five years of a child's life are fundamentally important. They are the foundation that shapes children's future health, happiness, growth, development and learning achievement at school, in the family and community, and in life in general. Research confirms that the first five years are particularly important for the development of the child's brain, and the first three years are the most critical in shaping the child's brain architecture (Diamond, Whittington, 2015; Lally, 2012; Roman, 2013) early experiences provide the base for the brain's organizational development and functioning throughout life. They have a direct impact on how children develop learning skills as well as social and emotional abilities (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). On the contrary, recent policy initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind, Good Start, and Grow Smart which encourages and supports high stakes assessments, and accountability based policy and initiatives tend to assume that each and every child should acquire and master a specific set of skills and knowledge at exact and definite point in time (Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Ryan, 2008; Stipeck, 2006). These policies have the potential to not only challenge what is known about how children grow and develop but, they also affect the way
individuals’ working with children are construct or figure their professional identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), how they are seen by others, and how the field of care and education in early years is approached and discussed.

The focus of policy is geared towards aspects of the actual structure of early childhood care and education managerial and structural components. Policy focuses attention on characteristics that can easily be regulated, quantified, and overgeneralized. Ng (2006) asserts that while in other countries there has been an overhaul and collective movement towards early childhood care and education becoming a public responsibility, here in the U.S. it remains to be individual’s private responsibilities. Politicians push for the improvement in quality in early childhood education under the guise that they are advocating for better outcomes in terms of long term economic success as well as increased opportunities for learning experiences that produce successful little people (Irvine & Farrell, 2013). According to Connors (2016) recent policies concerned with quality for early childhood care and education are geared towards aspects of the field that are centered around the notion of offering quality care that so that all children have early starts in education in preparation for what is expected upon entering school. On the surface this sounds admirable, however, there tends to be very little consideration for the “middle”-persons, the ones responsible for not only supporting policy but actually bringing it to life. It seems paradoxical that the very policy that is meant to ensure that all children are provided with quality learning experiences does see the importance and relevance for offering the same level of dedication and commitment to ensuring that early childhood practitioners receive quality learning experiences to be able to work with young children. When it comes to policy implementation, one critical aspect to also consider are the ways on-the-ground early childhood
professionals still take up and make sense of such policies in light of the dismissal of their personal and professional learning and construction of their professional identities.

While high quality care for young children has been shown to be a major contributing factor to having positive future development and school success for children (Ng, 2006; Herndon & Waggoner, 2015), the way policy defines and discusses quality tends to be problematic. For example, Osgood (2009) deconstructs key policy text to explore the ways England’s government uses discourse to constructs nursery workers. She asserts that the manner in which nursery school workers have been constructed discursively within government discourse has evolved over time but is now and continues to move in a direction that is highly politicized. She also argues that the discourse used in policy presents the notion of an existing and ever growing “crisis” in early childhood and care. Through the promotion of this crisis notion policy then uses this as an opportunity to refashion and construct the aims and goals of quality in early childhood care and education. Osgood (2009) also argues that it is through these policy claims that nursery workers professional identities have been created and viewed as less or more professional at specific political moments. Overall, Osgood’s (2009) study calls for critical analysis of discourse used in policy.

Brown (2014) also discusses the discourse used in policy. Brown (2014) employs Foucault’s method of “eventalising” as a way to explore a case study investigation of national quality policy between the years 2006 and 2009 that focuses on two major policy processes, the Howard Coalition quality overhaul and the Rudd/Gillard Labor Government quality framework. Brown (2014) states that the need for an overhaul in quality for the early childhood and educations sector was devised as a way to address and pacify a politically fabricated state of crisis that existed in the sector. Brown’s (2014) research spotlights the possible dangers
associated with ingrained ideas of politicians and related policymakers that identifies early childhood care and education how policy’s utilization of human capital discourse played a critical role in the positioning early childhood care and education as and economic and productivity investments. She asserts that this research is detrimental as a way to derail and replace human capital discourses with alternative means for investing in early childhood that could be used to produce transformative policy that addresses a myriad of concerns in the field of early childhood (Brown, 2014).

In these examples, “quality” is presented as a permanent fixture, a sole authoritative voice dictating the only way quality can be understood and interpreted. The focus is placed on individual program attributes and aspects of structural quality such as group size, staff qualifications/levels of experience, and teach-to-child ratio while ignoring other characteristic of quality. Another discussion of quality reveals separate but complimentary parts. Cassidy et al. (2005) provides an alternative definition by using a comprehensive approach by referring to two individual but complementary characteristics- process and structural quality. Structural quality refers to resources and the way the resources and the organization of the resources that are in the early childhood program/classroom. The second component, process quality, is more related to the relationships, interactions, and social procedures occurring between among children and teachers. It is key to remember that how an individual or group of individuals talk about a particular topic, in this case quality early childhood care and education, is related to how they define it. If we are going to take part in conversation about how to improve the quality of early childhood care and education, then it is important that we are aware that there are various ways in which quality is defined. There is not one static definition of what is meant by quality in early childhood care and education. Other perceptions of “quality” in regards to early childhood care
and education serve as reminders that this is a “…relative concept… subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs, and interests, rather than an objective and universal reality” (Pence & Moss, 1994, p. 172). Being aware of research such as this helps us understand that a definition of quality is not fixed; rather, it is fluid and can change depending on the particular group. Individuals, including children, parents, teachers, and care providers have a variety of needs and values, and these differences play a role in the varying definitions of quality (Ceglowski, 2004). Although parents, teachers, and children are those who participate and are most directly impacted by childcare, there has been little research that explores their perceptions and definitions of quality childcare (Brown, 2014; Connors, 2016; Cry and Burchinal, 1997).

Bechtold’s (2011) dissertation is one of the few studies that explored quality from the perspectives of early care and education teachers. Bechtold (2011) aimed to listen to the “voices” of early-care and education teachers as they defined and described their perceptions of what a high-quality classroom looks like and the teaching practices that they identified and used within their classrooms. She explains that because the research also proposes that the educational level of the teacher makes a difference in the quality of their practices, she also wanted to explore their perceptions regarding higher education and their motivation to return to post-secondary education to obtain a degree. Bechtold’s (2011) data revealed the following: first, the early-care and education teachers described high quality early-care and educational programming as (a) child-centered, (b) involves parents, (c) teamwork within the center, (d) environment of the classroom, (e) developmentally appropriate curriculum, as well as conditional on the (f) education and the (g) experience of the teacher. Secondly, she found that the teaching practices identified as necessary in a high-quality classroom reflect either structural or process quality. Thirdly, she found that the educational level and years of experience that represented early-care
and education teachers were mixed. The majority of the participants did agree that some level of education is important, for example, a Child Development Accreditation Certificate (CDA), Associate in Applied Science (AAS) or Bachelor (BS/BA). However, the participants emphasized that the focus of the degree program must be Early Childhood Education, more specifically, birth through age five years. Their years of experience within the field of early-care and education was seen as extremely important and valuable to the participants, and participants thought this experience should be positively acknowledged and validated at higher education institutions.

In order to improve the overall quality of early childhood care and education there requires a rethinking and expansion of not only what is meant by quality, but also who and in what ways are individuals included. By choosing to refocus, and encourage professional learning and development for early childhood educators’ learning using social processes, policy can then address the acquisition of specialized knowledge that aids in the improvement of quality. Additionally, by implementing policies that call for professional development that is situated, practical, and contextualized, the identities of early childhood professionals can be viewed in ways that are directly connected to the learning process. In the same way research supports that positive cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes are associated with learning that occurs in environments that exhibit positive interactions, relationships, and experiences as being beneficial for students, similarly, the association should be explored in regards to the preparation of professionals in the field of early childhood care and education.

While early childhood care and education quality is a broad and general concept there has been a small body of research that focused on providing a definition of quality. Ceglowski’s (2004) study used focus groups to provide research of various stake holder group’s definition of
quality of in Minnesota’s regulated child care system. Using participants which included a variety of stakeholders such as parents, licensed and legally unlicensed childcare providers, center-based and Head Start Staff, preschool administrators, legislators, and researchers, her overall aim was to develop a broader and more encompassing definition of childcare quality from various perspectives (Ceglowski, 2004). She found that various stakeholder groups valued a range of qualities concerning quality as opposed to the prevailing definition of childcare quality, which was solely concerned with what is good for the child. Having research that explores various definitions of quality in early childhood provides politicians and others in charge of writing and implementing policy with perspectives concerning what is important at the local state and federal levels. This type of insight provides opportunities to create professional learning and training that is concerned with the overall development of practitioners.

If improved quality in early childhood care and education by way of better preparation of early childhood professionals is an aim of early childhood policy, then what is needed is not only critical inquiry regarding what is meant by quality as suggested by the literature, but there also needs to be emphasis on exploring the learning experiences and professional identity construction of early childhood professionals. By learning more about how early childhood professionals learn in social contexts and construct their professional identities, we can then begin to bridge the gap between what policies legitimate as learning experiences and what practitioners identify as legitimate learning. When there can be a reduction in the policy-practice gap, then there can be more informed conversations in regards to what is really needed to improve the overall quality of early childhood care and education.
Early Childhood Educators: Professional Identity & Professional Learning

The Divide

As policymakers work towards improving the overall quality of early childhood care and education through what appears to be the creation and implementation of top-down, one-sided policy, research tells us there exists a divide in early childhood (Chen, 2016; Hayes, 2010; Oberhuemer, 2005; O’Connor, McGunnigle, Treasure, & Davie, 2015; Sims, 2014; Urban, 2008, Sims, 2014; Hayes, 2010). It is through this clear distinction that we can see that the opportunities for more learning and acquiring of skills are limited, and becoming more controlled and focused on the procedural aspects of the field (i.e. documentation, accountability, child-caregiver ration) and less about the teaching /pedagogical aspects of the profession. If the goal is to provide a better quality of early childhood education, more specifically dealing with childcare, then I assert that an alternate means for improving the overall quality of early learning experiences for young children is to conduct research that seeks to understand the impact of early childhood professionals’ learning experiences as a part of their professional identity construction. This type of study offers a shift from research that addresses the procedural aspects of the field and places focus on exploration that provides insight regarding how practitioners acquire the necessary skills and knowledge needed to improve their practice, as well as the overall quality of early childhood care and education.

Professional Identities in Early Childhood Education

A review of the literature about professional identities of childcare /early childhood educators revealed few studies that explored the construction of childcare workers professional identities in connection with how they interact with their colleagues in the workplace as a way to foster learning and information sharing. The literature does discuss critical reflection for early
childhood educators’ identities in relation to their professional identities. Langford (2008) urges early childhood educators to use critical discourses to think about how they see themselves and are represented by others in social relations. Mevorach and Miron (2011) reported that veteran early childhood educators experienced changes in their professional identities by way of critical reflection encountered in graduate programs. Martin, Meyer, Jones, Nelson, and Ting (2010) discuss how individuals in their study who work with children ages birth to 5 years struggled to be acknowledged as professionals. Their investigation identified the following as contributors to an individual’s feeling about being a childcare professional: 1. Commitment 2. Years of experience 3. Work enjoyment 4. Regular training 5. Ability to use training 6. Parent’s use of them as resources and 7. Feeling qualified (Martin et al., 2010 p. 345).

Lanigan (2011) reported that while working with research on intentionality with early learning educators she found that participants had a difficult time articulating their own professional roles and identities. Lanigan (2011) also found that a large number of family childcare providers viewed themselves as professionals; however, other providers felt as though regulators, center based providers, and families only saw them as babysitters rather than early learning professionals.

Timmerman and Schreuder (2008) explored the professional identity of childcare workers from a cognitive perspective. The cognitive perspective of professional identity comes from professionals themselves describing what it is they do. In this perspective of professional identity formation the focus is placed on the ways individuals comes to terms and make meaning of who they are professionally based on the knowledge and skills they possess and acquire as an individual. Self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-motivation are components associated with the professional identity formation from a cognitive approach (Timmerman and Schreuder,
The study is based on how the childcare staff expressed opinions and ideas about their own work. In their research, Timmerman and Schreuder (2008) distinguish that personal characteristics (e.g. personal commitment, self-motivation, educational level) described only the individual traits that were relevant to the work they did in the profession. Their aim was to explore the professional identity of the trainees in childcare with the following overarching research question: What personal and professional characteristics are crucial for the professional identity of childcare staff, from the trainee childcare workers perspective? The results revealed that the individual participants considered love of children, care, and a sense of responsibility to be the most important personal characteristics for caregivers to possess in regards to personal characteristics in professional identity. Looking at professional characteristics and in the sub category of care orientation, the majority of participants agreed that childcare givers should be like a mother to the children, however the authors do point out that this does not mean that the patterns from the responses (regarding having children) do not imply that workers who are also parents are better suited to be early childhood professionals than those that do not have children. In regards to pedagogical orientation, participants identified treating children equally and being in control as the most important and good discipline, treating children as individuals, and distracting a distressed child as less important. In the section of the questionnaire that addressed providing developmental activities, the participants expressed the following as very important: reading to children, singing, (language) games, and allowing children to let off steam outside. From these results, Timmerman and Schreuder (2008) concluded that the participants’ personal image of their professional identities did not resemble gendered stereotypes portrayed in the media, nor did the participants think that gender affected the quality of care provided by workers. In regards to how the participants view the pedagogical portion of their professional identities,
the study indicated that the trainees thought it was very important to offer children activities that were broad and differentiated in a range of development. Timmerman and Schreuder’s (2008) study illustrates that while individuals personal image is a significant component that contributes to the feeling of being professional in the field of early childhood care and education, they also identified other components such as pedagogical orientation, years of experience, work enjoyment, training, and education as complementary elements involved in the construction of professional identities for those involved in the care and education of young children. Their study showed that what is needed is more research that explores early childhood professionals’ experiences with learning.

Been’s (2012) dissertation is one of few studies that explores the identity construction of early childhood educators. Been (2012) used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study to examine six early childhood teachers’ professional identities to address the question about what it means to be an early childhood teacher in today’s educational climate. The study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of professional identity formation, with the perspective that identities are "multi-faceted" (Alsup, 2006), as well as “socially and culturally” (Swennen, Volman, & van Essen, 2008) constructed by lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) throughout teachers’ lives. Like this current study, Been also utilized the sociocultural theory of figured worlds as means for understanding her participants’ identity construction. While she only uses figured worlds, my study additional employs situated learning in communities of practice, and apprenticeship to address the connections between identity construction and learning.

Been’s work reveals the following themes in her participants’ identification of major influences concerning the construction of their professional identities: 1. teachable moments, 2. advocacy, 3. relationships, and 4. stress and struggles. Been (2012) asserts that this body of work
is helpful in working towards better understanding that the voices of teachers of young children are a major and vital aspect of the continuing, difficult, and complex dialogue about early childhood teachers. Been addresses that early childhood teachers are at risk in the current academic focused climate, which potentially negatively impacts young children as well as the nation’s educational system.

While there is literature that addresses early childhood educators’ learning and identities, the focus of that literature is often on how others (i.e. parents, society, politicians) construct the identities of early childhood professionals. While it is important to be knowledgeable about how others construct the professional identities of early childhood professionals, I argue that it is just as important to focus on and understand how learning impacts early childhood professionals’ construction of their own professional identities.

**Research on the Professional Development/Learning for Early Childhood Educators**

As childcare and early childhood educators feel the pressure of accountability being pushed down from a variety of sources, what is being addressed in policy focuses on explicitly stating that there is a need to provide more and improved opportunities for early childhood educators to learn and develop. As policy pushes for improved quality, which is synonymous with better prepared and more qualified educators in early childhood education by way of learning that occurs in formal educational institutions, what is missing is consideration for various forms and approaches to professional development and learning for early childhood educators. Exploring professional development and learning in the early childhood literature reveals that scholars agree that there has been an increase in the offering of professional development geared towards early childhood educators; however, there is a need for addressing the overall and long standing effectiveness of those professional development experiences and

Ottley et al. (2015) employed a longitudinal piecewise growth research method research design to examine the patterns and predictors of change in knowledge and beliefs for early childhood educators who took part in state-implemented professional development. Ottley et al.’s (2015) sample included 87 early childhood educators that were equally spread across rural, urban, and suburban settings, where 32 worked in public schools, 41 in-center based settings, and 2 in-home based settings in a large Midwestern state. The study revealed that early childhood educators improved their knowledge and beliefs to varying degrees in the course of the school year as professional development was provided; however, they also reported that change plateaued where educators showed no signs of improvement or regression during the following school year. Ottley et al. (2015) stated that openness to change and self-efficacy were significant predictors of the educators’ knowledge and beliefs during the study. While there was change and effectiveness seen during this study, Ottley et al. (2015) state that more research is needed to evaluate the long-term effect of the state implemented professional development.

Simpson and Linder (2014) also stated that it is important to call attention to the fact that there are few studies that focus on the long-term effects and impact of professional development, specifically those that focus on math for educators working with children birth to age five in education settings prior to entering formal education institutions. Simpson and Linder (2014) used a multi-phased mixed method study with follow-up surveys as a way to examine and investigate how and to what extent pre-service and in-service early childhood educators in a southeastern state in the United States are being prepared to develop math skills and processes in
children birth to age five. In answering the research question the results indicated that professional development in math for the early childhood educators is lacking. They explain that educators who received professional development expressed that they were not being offered chances to attend math sessions; the educators also expressed the desire to attend professional development sessions in math. Simpson and Linder (2014) found that in regards to specific content areas, most sessions were offered in the area of literacy/English language arts. It was also reported that pre-service and in-service teachers in this study were not being prepared to implement math standards in the classroom (Simpson & Linder, 2014). Simpson and Linder (2014) explicitly state that there needs to be further studies that examine: 1. the transition from session to classroom practice, 2. student understanding, and 3. the impact of on-going professional development with follow up sessions, and 4. the overall influence of professional development in a variety of specific content strands (p.341).

Piasta et al. (2015) state that current research and initiatives in education call for more attention to be placed on math and science learning experiences during early childhood, including the suggestions for offering professional development of high quality in the fields of math and science. They also explain that the research that is currently available is descriptive or a part of larger studies that focus on professional development as it relates to the implementation of curriculum (Piasta et al., 2015). This study aimed to address the need for more research that assists and aids in achieving a better understanding of the “extent to which professional development may increase math and science learning opportunities and impact child outcomes” (Piasta, 2015 p. 5). Piasta et al. (2015) used quantitative research to make the following hypothesis: 1. participants in math and science professional development would positively impact the amount of math and science learning opportunities provided by early childhood
educators, 2. math and science professional development would positively impact children’s math and science learning gains, indirectly or directly due to the increased learning opportunities provided by educators, and 3. there would be replication extant findings illustrating positive associations between math learning opportunities and children’s gains in math learning. Early childhood educators participated in two phases of study activities for 18 months. In the professional development phase which occurred from March 2010-August 2011, educators completed pre-test questionnaires and an initial classroom observation, followed by twice-monthly professional development sessions. In the implementation phase, September 2010-May 2011, educators were expected to integrate professional development content into their classroom instruction, keeping weekly teaching logs, taking part in second classroom observation and a refresher workshop, and complete end of the project questionnaires (Piasta et al., 2015). Data was analyzed using mediation analysis and the following were presented and discussed as findings: 1. The extended amounts of math and sciences professional development for increasing young children’s math and science professional development may have an impact on the science, but not the math, learning opportunities provided by early childhood educators, 2. Professional development did not result in large benefits for children’s math and science learning, despite the connections that were made between learning experiences and child learning gains. Studies such as Piasta et al. 2015 are important because they are informative regarding what was positive and negative about the professional development learning experiences of a group of early childhood professionals. From types of research such as this, it serves as a cornerstone and call for more work to be done that explores the learning experiences and professional development of early childhood professionals. It is also key because it positions early childhood professionals at the center of the research.
Wong, Harrison, Press, Sumson, Gibson, and Woods (2015) assert that there is a plethora of evidence that suggests that the work done by early childhood educators is poorly understood outside of the field. When others discuss the overall nature of work in early childhood it has a tendency to be closely related to discourses of mothering and often seen as something that should just occur naturally (Ailwood, 2007; Canella, 1997). However, those in the field are aware that this work is complex, challenging, and demanding; they also acknowledge the need for individuals who are skilled and possess a specialized knowledge of child development, teaching, learning, and culture. Early childhood education requires the inclusion of individuals with a specific knowledge set, as well as on-going professional development and training to do the work associated with early childhood education (Wong et al, 2015).

Summary

Within the field of early childhood there have been many studies that have explored the impact of policy reforms on education and teaching in the early years (e.g. Goldstein, 2008; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Wien, 2004). However, there is little research that explores how it is that childcare workers “figure” who they are as well as how it is they come to know what they know about children and learning in the early years. Often times when policy is being created and presented, discourses included in the conversation – such as high quality, best practices, and professionalization – automatically assume positive effects. It is important that we not only rethink but challenge policy and research that position childcare workers as unqualified and of poor quality by their standards. It is important to explore and present evidence that learning and professionalism are not only acknowledged when one holds a degree. Using the theoretical frameworks that include figured worlds, communities of practice, situated learning
and apprenticeship, I will provide a colorful lens to show that my CYPA participants possessed rich and invaluable personal and professional learning experiences that impacted and played a major role in the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

While I agree that is important to look at what can be done to improve the quality of early childhood care and education, I also assert that we should spend more time and effort looking at how is it that practitioners come to know what they know, and do what they do, as a way to work together and better address what is needed to improve all aspects of early childhood care and education.

Chapter 2 provided discussion of relevant literature in about policy and quality in early childhood education, early childhood educators’ professional identity and professional learning, professional identities in early childhood education, and research on the importance of professional development and learning for early childhood educators. In chapter 3, I describe the methodology used in this study and justify my choice for a qualitative research design with a phenomenological case study approach. I also describe the procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I present the methods I used to explore connections between CYPAs’ learning, personal and professional, and the construction of their professional identities as early childhood professionals. In what follows, I describe my methodological framework by first explaining my choice to utilize a qualitative research design, and then justifying my choice for a phenomenological case study approach. Following that, I provide details on the context of the study, procedures for data collection, and data analysis.

Methodological Framework

Justification for my choice of methodological framework requires consideration of the research questions that drove this study. The overarching question guiding this study was:

- How do Child and Youth Program Assistants (CYPA) on a military installation construct their identities as early childhood professionals?

Sub-questions included the following:

- What personal learning experiences have impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities?
- What professional learning experiences have impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities?

My choice for a qualitative research design that employed a hermeneutic phenomenological lens was connected to the interpretive nature of my research questions. Burns and Grove (2003) describe a qualitative approach as “a systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences and situations to give them meaning” (p. 19). Parahoo (1997) explains that qualitative research focuses on the experiences of people as well as homes in on the uniqueness of the individual. Similarly, Holloway and Wheeler (2002) view qualitative research
as “a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experience and the world in which they live” (p. 30). The qualitative approach can be used as a means for exploring behavior, perspectives, experiences and feelings of people.

This approach allowed me to have a humanistic perspective and created space to conduct a study that sought to understand the lived experiences of early childhood educators, CYPAs, on a military installation. According to Field and Morse (1996), researchers that choose to utilize a qualitative research approach are able to embrace a holistic, person-focused and humanistic perspective as a way to understand people’s lived experiences. Qualitative research allowed me, as the researcher, to focus on the experiences from the perspectives of my participants. In order to gain an emic perspective, I became involved and immersed in the professional lives and learning experiences of CYPAs. According to Streubert and Carpenter (1999), “the researcher’s participation in the study adds to the uniqueness of data collection and analysis” (p. 17).

The rationale for using a qualitative approach in this research was to explore and then interpret CYPAs various learning experiences, as well as how they constructed their own identities as early childhood professionals in this unique setting of a military installation. The qualitative approach also enabled me to provide thick, rich descriptions of the individual learning experiences of the CYPAs on a military installation in connection to the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

Participants’ interpretations and meaning making are the core of qualitative research. One of the key concerns of a researcher doing qualitative work is purposeful and intentional awareness that one’s theories about phenomena comes from a place of trustworthiness where participants’ perspectives are accurately interpreted and represented. For this study, as opposed to seeking generalizations about all early childhood professionals, I purposefully chose to focus
on exploring and understanding participants’ learning experiences and professional identities construction. As I carried out this study and analyzed data, I was intentional in my search for not only patterns, but for contradictions and inconsistencies as well. Keeping in mind the complexities of identity construction, data triangulation aided in the process for working towards the goals of “constructing plausible explanations” for qualitative researchers (Mathison, 1989).

Data triangulation is key as one works towards the building of “good qualitative research” (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) describes “good qualitative research” in terms of a study that “was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner, such that the results can be trusted” (p. 24). In accordance with the traditions in building and maintaining trustworthiness in qualitative research, I utilized the following data triangulation methods: researcher journaling, analysis of multiple data sources, member-checks, and peer-review. Researcher journaling was an ongoing self-monitoring process which aided in the awareness of my positionality and biases. I began my study by reflecting on my personal interest and passion for the topic of professional identity construction and learning for early childhood professionals in the CDC context. Additionally, I answered and recorded my own responses to each of the individual and collective interview questions I asked my participants. I documented these reflections as biases in my researcher journal prior to asking them. I later referred to them as I collected and analyzed data (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) explains that multiple sources of data are beneficial in that they allow for triangulation and overall confirmability of a study. In this study multiple sources of data included researcher journaling, individual and group participant interviews, participant observations and field notes, memos, and artifact collection were collected. Member checking (Bowen, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) was conducted as means for confirming that the study’s description resonates with the CYPA’s experience, and it lent to the
study’s credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Member-checks occurred during and after my fieldwork. During data collection, I often conferred individually and collectively with participants as I sought to verify, clarify, gain a better understanding and in some cases, ask for assists in making sense of what I experienced during informal conversations and observations. After my data collection as I engaged in making more connections and engaged in more complex and deeper data analysis, I conducted member checks by sharing the following with my participants: detailed outlines of my chapter 4 and 5, data and my interpretations of their personal and professional learning experiences. Finally, peer-review triangulation occurred as I engaged in many informal conversations with my dissertation chair. These conversations served as opportunities for my own considerations and reconsidersations of multiple perspectives and interpretations of my data.

Case Study

Hartley (2004) states that case study research "consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context," with the aim being "to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied" (p.323). For this study, case study as a methodological strategy provided the opportunity for me to explore and gain an understanding of the way in which CYPAs, a specific group of early childhood professionals, CYPAs, construct their professional identities within their context, a child development center located on a military installation. In addition, Yin (2003) explains, in a more detailed manner, that case study is an empirical form of inquiry that does the following:

- “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident
• copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
• relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion
• benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis". (p. 13-14)

From Yin (2003) this is what allowed me to emphasize that a key element and important strength of this case study was the capability to explore and learn in an in-depth way from the participants, CYPAs, about the way they constructed their professional identities in addition to factors that impacted have and may continue to impact their professional identity construction and the kinds of learning experiences they have encountered, all while in the context of a military child development center.

**Phenomenology**

While case study in this research provided me with the tools to explore the context, phenomenology provided me with the tools for looking at and interpreting the phenomena at the individual level. I used phenomenology to explore and get an understanding of the impact of various learning experiences CYPAs encountered and their connection to how they constructed their professional identities as they operated day to day within the context of a military CDC. According to Lindgren and Kehoe (1981), the purpose of a phenomenological approach is to understand the issue or topic from the everyday knowledge and perceptions of specific respondent subgroups. It is situated within an interpretivist tradition that gives priority to understanding the meaning that individuals make of their experiences (Garrick, 1999). More specifically, it is informed by phenomenological perspectives that focus on describing how
people experience their world and what it is like to be in that world (van Manen, 1990). It is through this approach that researchers may possess some basic knowledge about the topic, but are interested in gaining a more in-depth understanding or perhaps, clarifying potentially conflicting information. This approach is not primarily concerned with explaining the causes of things; rather, it makes an attempt to describe how things are experienced first-hand by those involved (Denscombe, 2004).

The study was situated within an interpretivist tradition and it gave priority to understanding the meaning that individuals made of their experiences (Garrick, 1999). More specifically, it is informed by phenomenological perspectives that focus on describing how people experience their world and what it is like to be in that world (van Manen, 1990).

**Researcher Journals: Positionality**

As I conducted this study I explored my own life stories and interpreted them as a way to bring to the forefront my own “biases, understandings, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and theories” (van Manen, 1990, p. 47). I needed to be aware as well as upfront about my own positionality as an individual that has been and is an early childhood teacher, training and curriculum specialist (TACS), woman, mother, military spouse, and researcher, but I also needed to think about my multiple roles as well as in connection to the CYPA's. This purposeful and intentional thinking assisted me in being cognizant and attentive regarding the interaction between myself and the CYPA’s as I learned about their learning and the construction of their professional identities. Keightley (2010) explains that “situating the researcher clearly in terms of their own social and cultural position, and in relation to the participants, is crucial in evaluating ho knowledge has been generated in their interaction “(p. 66). Additionally, van Manen (1990) explains that it is not enough for the researcher to make a phenomenological
question clear and to be understood; they must also live the question. I used researcher journaling “bracketing” (van Manen, 1990) in terms of acknowledging my own stance and position in the world as I work to explore and interpret the phenomena of professional identity construction and learning for CYPA’s on a military installation. The inclusion of my own reflections, and experiences served as a way for me to explicitly acknowledge and reject my personal views while I “borrow other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole of human experience” (van Manen, 1990, p.62).

As the researcher I brought to the study over 15 years of experience working in some shape, form, or fashion in the field of early childhood education and care. More specifically, at least the last 5 of those years have been connected to child development centers on a military installation, which serves as the context of this study. I initially became involved with the child development center as a spouse of a military service member and parent of a child that attended one of the five centers. I became involved initially as a parent volunteer where I assisted and worked with various age groups across the center. As I spent more time at the center volunteering, my child’s teacher asked if I would serve on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) as the classroom representative for my child’s class. A few of my responsibilities and obligations as a member of the PAC were to generate ideas for event and activities to enhance and accompany the curriculum at the center. I also was a liaison between parents, administration, and the childcare providers. While volunteering at the child development center, the director expressed she was impressed with the way I worked with the children, parents, and the staff and offered me a job. Upon the director’s review of my resume, she explained that she wanted me as a CYPA, but she had another position that would be more fitting for my education level and area.
of expertise. She asked me to apply for the Training and Curriculum Specialist (TACS) position. Admittedly, I had never heard of a TACS, but she assured me that just looking at my credentials and watching me work, I was exactly what a TACS was supposed to be.

As I reflected on my transition from being a parent, an outsider, to a TACS, a member of military child development and care, I wondered about my own construction of professional identity as well as the ways in which others in this setting construct their professional identities. I saw that by having worked at Quartz CDC at Ft. Gem, I had the privilege of having an idea and somewhat of an inside view of the day to day workings, activities, learning and relationships occurring in this unique setting. Being employed as a TACS for two years also allowed me to step back and engage with the overall structure of a military child development center. On the other hand, being away from the child development center for over a year also allowed me to step back and from a different position, explore the way in which CYPAs constructed their own professional identities in a military context. I was also cognizant that my former status as an administrator at the CDC may have both positive and negative impacts on my study regarding the securing of potential participants. What I found was that the positive relationships that I built served as encouragement for CYPAs to participate in this study. The relationships also lead to having open, personal, critical, and reflective conversations. My reflection also led me to be careful in that I was aware that my former role as an administrator may still linger and cause feelings of tension, superiority, and evaluation. I am also aware that my roles as an instructor of early childhood courses at a university and as a researcher also placed me in a position to see professional identity construction in a different light as well. The combination of my overall experiences served as a backdrop to help me as I navigated some portions of the context, and
also provided me with guidance as I interacted and engaged with the participants during interviews, observations, and the focus group.

To conclude this section, it is key to recognize uneven power dynamics that are a part of research. While researcher journaling was useful in helping me, the researcher, become aware and explicit about my personal biases it does not negate the fact that as the I, the author, is still solely in charge of the story that is told. In this study, triangulation and researcher journaling assisted me in better understanding how participants constructed their professional identities; however, while working through the process of analysis, their stories and perspectives were still subjected to being “filtered through [my]own experiences” (O’Reilly, 2012).

Research Context

Ft. Gem Military Installation

This qualitative case study using a hermeneutic phenomenological stance was conducted in the larger context of Ft. Gem, a military installation located in the southwest region of the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau, Ft. Gem has been recognized as an incorporated place which means it was established to provide government functions for a concentration of people and is in general in place to provide services and or to administer an area no matter population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Ft. Gem had a population of approximately 9,321 people, 2,527 households, and 2,500 families that resided on the military installation. The median age of the population was 22.2 and the median household was approximately $48,610. The population of Ft. Gem was 49% white, 20.6% black, and 19.2% Hispanic. Of the approximate 9,321 people that made up the overall population on Ft. Gem, 11% of the individuals were children 5 years-old and younger.
Military Child Development Centers (CDC)

This study was conducted at one of five child development centers located on Ft. Gem Military Installation. Each of the CDCs at Ft. Gem were in operation Monday thru Friday, 5:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Dependent Children 6 weeks to 12 years of Active Duty personnel, DAC employees, Army Community Service (ACS) and American Red Cross (ARC) volunteers and members of the military reserve components who have been activated were eligible to attend this center.

After speaking with the Chief of Child and Youth Services (CYS) and CYPAS they confirmed the information I gathered from various military installation’s webpages, including Ft. Gem’s. The webpages stated the overall goal of the CDCs were to provide closely supervised play and developmentally appropriate activities for young children (“Ft. Gem Military Child Development Centers”, n. d.). Programs were available for the convenience of parents who needed to be away from their children for short or long periods of time during the day. The website also stated that professional child development center staff members were available to provide safe and pleasant environments, as well as create mental and physical developmental programs that combined social and educational activities for children attending the CDCs.

All of the CDCs receive unannounced inspections conducted by the Military Services Agency on an annual basis. Each of the CDCs at Ft. Gem at that time of this study held certification from the Department of Defense (DoD) and were also accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAECP) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). All CDCs provided care and activities for hourly and full day children based on local needs and capabilities. Children ages 6 weeks to 5 years of age to include military and DoD civilian parents were also allowed and encouraged to CDCs.
Quartz Child Development Center (QCDC)

This study was conducted at Quartz Child Development Center (QCDC), located on Ft. Gem military installation. While data collection lasted from January 2017-June 2018, I actually began volunteering and reestablishing connections, rapport, and familiarity with the overall context, setting, and world of the CDC in September of 2016. QCDC was one of five child development centers located on this particular military installation. During informal conversations with the Chief of (CYS) and CYPAs, I found out that QCDC was the oldest center at Ft. Gem and that it was the only center that did not fit the “new CDC model”. QCDC had 15 classrooms that all centered around a courtyard with a small center stage. On the back side of each classroom there were playgrounds equipped with age and developmentally appropriate size outdoor play equipment. These outdoor play areas were shared among classrooms with the same age groups.

At the time of my study, QCDC had a total of 16 classes with approximately 450 children enrolled in their various areas and programs. There were approximately 70 CYPAs, 16 support staff (i.e. clerks, custodial staff, cooks), and there were 4 administrators (e.g. director, assistant directors, and training and curriculum specialist) that worked at QCDC. As I spent time there I noticed that the common way to refer to the various classes at the QCDC was to refer to the children and staff by age groups and the type of program they were enrolled. QCDC had an infant/pre-toddler area, toddler area, preschool area, strong beginning, and before and after school areas. QCDC’s infant/toddler area served children ages 6 weeks to 14 months. There were a total of 4 classes that made up this area. Of the 4 classes, 3 were filled with children that were enrolled and attended the CDC on a part time (5 days a week for 4-5 hours) to full time (5 days a week for 6 or more hours) basis; while the fourth infant/toddler class was the hourly room
and operated by taking reservations for childcare. Secondly, there was the toddler area. This area served children 14 months to 35 months. There a total of 4 classes in the toddler area. Of the 4 classes, 3 of them were considered Full/part time rooms and the fourth was the hourly class.

Thirdly, there was the preschool area. This area served children from 36 months to 48 months. There were a total of 4 classes in the preschool area. Of the 4 classes, 2 of them were considered full/part time rooms, 1 was an hourly classroom, and the last class was a part-day preschool. While the part day preschool program was considered a part of the preschool it was different because it served children from 3-5 years old, it began in September (after Labor Day), and ended in May (before Memorial Day), its hours were from 7:45am-10:45 am, and that parents had the option of their children attending from 2-5 days a week. Fourthly, QCDC had Strong Beginnings, a pre-K program for 4 and 5-year-olds, geared towards preparing children for entering kindergarten. There were 2 classes of Strong Beginnings, they operated on the same scheduled and often combined during the day. The final area at QCDC was the before and after school area. This area had 1 class. Children in the before and after school area were dropped to be off at the QCDC prior to 7:10 a.m. and then the CYPAs assigned to this area dropped off and picked up children to and from the local school they all attended.

Access

Data collection for this study took six months to complete. My previous connections as a parent, volunteer, and TACs over the course of 5 years, was instrumental in being able to gain access and secure QCDC as my research site. I realized that even though I no longer worked at the CDC I was still in a unique position when it came to having access to Ft. Gem Military Installation. It was my role as the spouse of an active military service-member that granted me access to the installation. When it came to selecting which CDC I would use to conduct my
research, I selected QCDC because of the personal and professional rich relationships I had formed with those working at that particular center. I also realized that by initially coming into contact with the center and the CYPAs in 2011 first as a parent, then a volunteer, and eventually their TACS they developed levels of comfort, respect, and trust for me. During those years I worked closely with the CYPAs in many capacities. I formed relationships and bonds not only as a parent, but also as a fellow educator and early childhood professional. I also chose QCDC because while working as the TACS, I recognized that I valued the skills, and knowledge that so many CYPAs possessed, but I also was faced with the reality that my attitude was not shared by everyone at the CDC. QCDC ultimately became my choice because it was where my interest in CYPAs’ professional identities and learning originated. An important aspect of qualitative research is relationships and I built and maintained positive relationships with a vast majority of CYPAs at QCDC. Conducting my research at QCDC also served as a way for me to stick with the group and the specific center that helped me open my eyes, really think, and ask the questions regarding how CYPAs see themselves as professional in the field of early childhood education. Going back to QCDC gave me an opportunity to explore and get a better understanding at the very place and with some of the very people who unknowingly started me down this path of inquiry.

During my first meeting with the chief and assistant chief of Child and Youth Services (CYS) for Ft. Gem, in September 2016, I expressed my interest in being considered for conducting research at QCDC. They both agreed that the topic was definitely needed in the field of early childhood especially in the context of military installations. While they both admitted they were on board and saw the contributions and benefits of participating they also expressed concerns for my choice of QCDC. They explained that they were a bit concerned and wondered
how I would be received at QCDC since I no longer was the TACS. I took the time to explain to both the chief and assistant chief the importance of establishing and building relationships when conducting qualitative research. I also explained that I had kept in contact with a number of staff and administrators at QCDC and ensured them that these types of relationships were key for this type of research to be meaningful and beneficial. I reminded them of the pilot study they had approved in 2014 and shared that that study served as a cornerstone of my inquiry and I wanted to continue the work I had started at QCDC. After talking about some preliminary findings of my pilot study they both agreed that the work I had started was interesting but more importantly they saw it as a great start to answering questions about CYPAs’ learning and professional identity construction. At the conclusion of that meeting we agreed to meet with the director of QCDC to seek her willingness to use QCDC as my research site.

During my second meeting in November 2016, the chief of CYS, and director of QCDC were present. During the meeting we went over my tentative research plan and QCDC director expressed her willingness and excitement in helping me with anything I needed to conduct and complete my research. The chief and director were both hopeful and anticipated that once my research was completed I would be able to assist them with better understanding the professional learning needs of CYPAs in turn helping them seek, create, and offer better and more meaningful professional development and trainings for the staff. In January 2017, the director called a meeting with the assistant directors, to whom I explained my research goals. I spent approximately a month volunteering in each of the classes and at various events at the CDC as a way to reconnect with familiar staff and to meet new staff.
Participants

On January 23, 2017, I started my data collection, by writing field notes from informal observations, classroom participation, interactions. By the end of the first week, I would have several CYPAs approach me and question me about returning to the CDC, and in other cases they would say they came to meet me because someone had spoken of me when I was the TACS. It was not until my third week did I find out that it was through word of mouth a majority, if not all, CYPAs were aware that I was there to conduct research about their professional identities. I decided to wait a month to begin recruitment. I chose to do so, for several reasons. First, I wanted to take time to add entries to my researcher journal and record my own biases and assumptions about CYPAs professional identities and learning. Secondly, I wanted to get reacquainted with the structure and practices of the CDC. Thirdly, while I did want to draw on bonds and relationships I developed with CYPAs, I also wanted to be viewed as a volunteer not as an administrator. Finally, I wanted to regain and refresh trust among staff I knew and work towards build trust and a relationship with new staff. I approached participant selection using snowball sampling. I began participant recruitment in February 2017. Bee and Nicla, two CYPAs I had built friendships with and kept in contact with after leaving the CDC, were the first two I emailed invitation letters for participating in my study. In the email, I explained my research and also asked if they would not mind sharing by forwarding the letter with any other CYPAs they thought might be interested in participating in the study. Bee and Nicla contacted me and shared that they had forwarded the letter to other CYPAs that had more questions. Next, of the letters Bee and Nicla shared, I met with 7 potential participants in person. During the meeting I went over the letter of invitation and answered all their questions. I explained to them that their participation was voluntary and that I would assist them with preparing lesson plans, special
events, newsletters, portfolios, trainings, and any other tasks they needed or wanted assistance with. The CYPAs were excited and welcomed the offer of help, they were excited about the opportunity to talk about who they were as early childhood professionals and the work they did. Once I answered their questions and we talked about my research study, there was no hesitation in signing the consent forms for participating in the study. Finally, nine CYPAs provided formal consent forms for participation in the study. All nine participants participated throughout the entire study. All of the participants were between the ages of 20-60 years old when they were recruited, held various levels of early childhood/childcare work and volunteer experiences, possessed a variety of levels of formal and informal early childhood education or training and all were identified as classroom representatives/leads from each area at QCDC.

While all participants in this study shared similarities—women of color, worked on the military installation, were classroom representatives/leads there each had different personal and professional experiences that impacted their learning and the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals. Next, I provide demographic and background information about each participant through short descriptions of each.

Nicla

Nicla was a 45-year-old African American woman. She was the mother of 2. She was originally from Georgetown South Carolina. She had been affiliated with the military as a CYPA and CDC bus driver for 10 years. Her highest level of education was a high school diploma. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for 10 years. All 10 of those years have been on a military installation at the CDC. Nicla came to the military CDC because her sister worked at another CDC on post and encouraged to move to the southwestern region and
work at the CDC as well. At the time of this study Nicla was the CDC’s only bus driver and the lead CYPA for children in the before and after school program housed at QCDC.

Tee

Tee was a 43-year-old self-identifying African American woman. She was the mother of 3. She was originally from Cameroon, Africa. She had been affiliated with the military as a military spouse for over 20 years. Her highest level of education was the completion of middle school. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for approximately 8 years. Of those 8 years 6 have been on a military installation at the CDC and the other 2 were spent at the School Aged Center (SAC) on a military installation in Germany. She started as a cook for the SAC, as she worked she found that she preferred to work with the children directly. She shared her passion for working more directly with children. Her director supported Tee’s decision by assisting her in finding a center that would prepare and train her for transitioning from cook to CYPA. At the time of this study Tee was the lead CYPA in one of the full/par time infant/pre-toddler rooms.

Rachel

Rachel was a 49-year-old self-identifying African American woman. She was the mother of 2. She was originally from Panama in Central America. She had been affiliated with the military as a spouse for over 20 years. Her highest level of education was vocational certification in medical coding and billing. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for 10 years. Of those 10 years, all have been on a military installation at the CDC. Rachel came to the military CDC after leaving a job at a local doctor’s office due to the demands and stress she experienced during her husband’s multiple deployment tours. At the time of this study, Rachel had recently transitioned from being one of the lead CYPAs/room representative
for one of the Strong Beginning classes to being one of the lead CYPAs/room representative for the preschool room Bee had just transitioned from.

Ro

Ro was a 37-year-old self-identifying African American woman. She was a mother of 4. She was originally from Oklahoma City Oklahoma. She had been affiliated with the military as a spouse for 23 years. Her highest level of education was a Bachelors of Art in Psychology. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for 10 years. Of those 10 years four have been on a military installation at a CDC. Ro came to the military CDC after looking to try something different. Ro began her professional experience with early childhood care and education when she first operated her own military sponsored in home family and childcare business as a provider for military children. After several years of being a FCC provider she branched out and began working in local nonmilitary childcare facilities and eventually moved on to work at the military CDC as a CYPA. At the time of this study Ro was the lead CYPA in the classroom for 4 and 5-year-old in the Strong Beginnings Pre- K program at QCDC.

Layken

Layken was a 25-year-old self-identifying African American woman. She was the mother of 2. She was originally from Bamberg, Germany. She had been affiliated with the military all her life, first as the child and later as the wife of a service member. Her highest completed level of education was a high school diploma, however, during this study she had taken a break from working her Bachelor’s degree. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for approximately 10 years. Of those 10 years the first 3 were spent volunteering at the SAC and CDC’s in Germany. It wasn’t until she was 18 did Layken begin working in a CDC as a CYPA. Layken came to the military CDC initially as a volunteer after she was required to
complete community service hours after being in trouble with the law. She enjoyed her time at the CDC and chose to work in the CDC’s as a CYPA. At the time of this study, Layken was the lead teacher/room representative in one of the toddler rooms at QCDC.

**Bee**

Bee was a 51-year-old self-identifying African American woman. She was the mother of 4. She was originally from Charleston, South Carolina. She had been affiliated with the military as a spouse for 23 years. Her highest level of education was a high school diploma. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for 20 years. Of those 20 years 15 have been on a military installation at the CDC. Bee came to the military CDC after working various jobs at various military installations. Bee ultimately decided to try the CDC because the hours were a better fit for her schedule due to having small children. Bee expressed that she loved children and that the CDC was a chance for her to spend her time doing what she loved to do, teaching children. At the beginning of the study Bee was the lead CYPA in one of the two preschool rooms; however, due to health issues, by the conclusion of this study, Bee had transitioned from lead CYPA to registration clerk at parent central registration office. She still served as an early childhood professional but in a different capacity, Bee now interacted with parents and children as she assisted them in getting registered to attend the CDC and other activities offered by CYS (i.e. swimming, soccer, dance, and counseling).

**Stela**

Stela was a 52-year-old self-identifying Mexican American woman. She was the mother of 3. She was originally from Juarez, Mexico. She had been affiliated with the military as the spouse of a service member for over 30 years. Her highest level of education was an Associate’s Degree in Child Development from a local community college. She has worked in the field of
early childhood care and education in various capacities for over 25 years. Of those years more than 20 have been on a military installation at the CDC. Stela became connected to the military CDC because one of her instructors was the CYS Chief. It was during Stela’s the last semester she began working at the CDC after asking the Chief about working with her at the CDC. At the time of this study, Stela was the Lead CYPA/ room representative for the hourly infant/pre-toddler’s class.

**Mary**

Mary was a 45-year-old self-identifying Mexican American woman. She was the mother of 2. She was originally from Juarez, Mexico. She had been affiliated with the military as a spouse for over 20 years. Her highest level of education was a high school diploma. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for 18 years. Of those 18 years 16 had been on a military installation at the CDC. Mary came to the military CDC after working in other daycare centers not affiliated with the military. At the time of this study, Mary had recently transitioned from being the lead/room representative CYPA in one of the toddler rooms to a being a part time CYPA in another toddler room.

**Isela**

Isela was a 53-year-old self-identifying Mexican American woman. She was the mother of 2. She was originally from El Paso, Texas. She had been affiliated with the military as a military spouse for over 30 years. Her highest level of education was a high school diploma. She has worked in the field of early childhood care and education for over 20 years. Of those 20 years 15 were on a military installation at the CDC. Isela came to the military CDC after becoming overwhelmed and burned out with being the director of her own daycare center. At the time of this study, Isela was the lead CYP for one of the toddler rooms at QCDC.
Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures

Demographic Questionnaire

CYPAs were asked to complete a questionnaire in February after they had agreed to participate in this study and had signed consent forms. I used the information from the questionnaire as an additional tool for collecting background information about each participant. The questionnaire also served as resources for making connections and establishing rapport with participants.

Interviews

Seidman (2006) explains that interviews are a basic form of inquiry, and it is through the allowance of recounting narratives of experiences that have been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have come to make sense of their experiences. Interviews serve as one of the most important and enriching data sources in a phenomenological case study because they will provide the researcher, the opportunity to experience a variety of perspectives (Hayes, 2000). The foundation of in-depth interviewing is an overall concern and interest in “understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Seidman (2006) explains that interviewing serves as a way to have access to the overall content of peoples’ behavior and in turn gives researchers a way to comprehend the meaning of a particular behavior. Interviews make space for the researcher to contextualize behavior while allowing space to make sense of participants’ actions. Blumer (1969) explains that one of the foundational assumptions associated with in-depth interviewing is that the way people act out an experience is affected by the way in which people make meaning of the experience. Seidman (2006) asserts that when a researcher’s overall goal is to gain an
understanding of the meaning individuals that are involved in education make of their experience, then interviews provide a necessary mode of inquiry.

In this study, the overall aim of the interviews were to explore how early childhood professionals construct their own professional identities. I employed in-depth interviews as a way to understand the personal and professional learning experiences of CYPAs and how they constructed their identities as early childhood professionals. As I prepared for each of my interviews with the individual participants, I approached each interview in a manner that created space for the participants and I to engage in authentic conversations and dialogue. Although I had prepared questions on particular topics, I avoided being rigid, scripted, and insensitive to what it was my participants decide to share. Although there are a variety of styles to conducting interviews, I that semi-structured interviews were best for exploring CYPA’s learning experiences as well as how they constructed their identities as early childhood professionals.

I employed Seidman’s three-interview series approach (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) states that “people’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (p.17). This approach allowed me and the CYPAs’ to have the opportunity to see into and come to understand their personal and professional learning experiences and their connection with the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

I conducted three in-depth interviews with each of the participants (see appendixes A, B, and C for interview guides). Each of the interviews lasted approximately 1.5 – 2 hours and were audio-recorded. It was important to completely transcribe all participant’s interviews in hopes that I would be able to fully understand their meanings. While I choose to wait and completely transcribe each interview upon the completion of data collection, I did go back and listen to the
audio and make notes about questions, and possible topics that I may need to further explore during observations and future interviews. The first interviews were individual and they were conducted at Nicla’s home. These individual interviews were geared and focused on the life history of the CYPAs. In this interview I asked participants to tell me about their pasts up until they became CYPAs. I also asked them to include any experiences they thought helped them prepare for being a CYPA and working with children. The second interviews were also conducted at Nicla’s home, approximately 3 weeks after the first interviews were completed. These interviews concentrated on specific and concrete details of the CYPA participant’s present lived experiences that deal with the construction of my participants professional identities. In this set of interviews, I asked CYPAs to tell me about what they actually do as CYPAs. I offered the suggestion of reconstructing a typical day as a CYPA for assisting them talk about the work they did in detail. The final interview occurred 4 to 6 weeks after the second set of interviews. In these interviews, I focused on engaging CYPAs in meaning making regarding the personal and professional learning experiences they shared in connection with the construction of their professional identities. They concentrated on reflecting on what their experiences meant by being asked to think and share how they made sense and understood who they were as early childhood professionals considering what they shared in interviews one and two.

**Focus Group Interview**

In June of 2017, I conducted one focus group interview with 7 of the 9 CYPAs (see appendix D for interview guide). Focus groups are important and valuable when in-depth information is needed regarding how people think about issues – their reasoning about why things are as they are, why they hold the views they do (Kitzinger, 1995). It is key for researchers to maintain awareness be intentional about periodically checking as a way to see if all members are in
agreement with is shared by asking questions such as “Is that what everyone thinks?” or ‘Does everyone agree with xyz?’ (Laws 2003 p. 300).

For this study, focus group interviews served the purpose of providing a space for group discussion about how they saw themselves as early childhood professionals but also how they come and continue to construct these identities in relation to others. Each participant collected four objects they felt represented who they were and what they do as CYPAs. The focus group provided insight as to how the CYPAs construct their professional identities as they interacted and engaged in conversation and meaning making with each other in addition to what they discussed during their individual interviews. The participants were excited to interact with each other. They were eager and willingly listened to all views, and often offered complimentary comments and insights regarding various aspects of how they construct their professional identities. I was surprised that with the diverse backgrounds and personal experiences there were no disagreements about their professional identities. There were few instances where the participants interrupted each other as they spoke; when it did occur, I asked if we could take turns and let each person complete their thoughts before we responded. The focus group lasted approximately three hours, but after it ended the CYPAs stayed and socialized and we continued talking for another two hours. The focus group, like the individual interviews were also audio recorded and fully transcribed. In attempt to accurately match induvial comments I also video recorded the focus group.

**Informal Participant Observations**

Participant observation provides the opportunity to possibly witness any changes that may occur over time (Bell, 2005). Being a participant observer also allows the researcher to share in the lives and day to day activities of my participants; learn their specialized language.
and interpret their meanings; to remember actions and speech; and to interact with people in their own environment (Burgess 1982). Additionally, participant observation was opportunity for my “immersion in local activities and experiences of others’ lives” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011 p. 21) through the engagement in authentic and local activities of CYPAs. My informal participant observations began January 23, 2017 and ended June 23, 2017. I had a rotating schedule for conducting informal participant observations at QCDC. I was at the center as least two times a week for at least 4 hours per visit. My participation with each class fluctuated depending on the number of children in the class, the activities planned, the behavior of the children, and the overall need of the CYPAs. I spent approximately 149 hours at QCDC conducting informal participant observation.

Fieldnotes

Field notes are important tools and serve as resources for helping researchers “gain an insiders depiction of the studied world” (Charmaz, 2006, p.21). They are generated by the researcher during qualitative fieldwork as tools and resources for remembering and recording key behaviors, activities, events, and other features that occur during observations (Labaree, 2016). Labaree (2016) suggests that when approaching writing field notes the researcher should engage in fleshing out field notes as soon as possible as a way of homing in on and remembering important facts, in order to have field notes that are rich, organized, and accurate data that will provide opportunities for full interpretation of the data. I was aware that by choosing to conduct informal participant observations I would not have opportunities to write complete and detail field notes. While in the field I was intentional about jotting down notes and phrases regarding the daily activities, conversations, and practices and I observed at QCDC. I also choose to set aside 3- 4 hours immediately after each observation to “flesh out” (Labaree 2016) my notes from
the day. I used my field as evidence that assisted me in meaning making and aided in my research as I sought to understanding CYPAs personal and professional learning and how they constructed their identities as early childhood professionals.

Throughout the study, I generated field notes documenting what I observed while working with the children, parents, CYPAs in a variety of settings. My field notes began as jottings on notecard sized post-it. In my jottings I included times, dates, descriptions, and brief conversations I observed while participating and observing. On observation days I dedicated 3-4 hours transforming my jottings into more detail recollections of what I had seen and felt as I worked alongside CYPAs. Additionally, I also made field notes of the various interactions I had with participants in various settings (i.e. lounge, training room, lunch, workshops). To keep track and organize my field notes, all were generated using a double entry field note template.

**Artifacts**

Artifacts were another source of data that was used for triangulation in this study. Some artifacts used as data were handouts and power point presentations used for trainings and professional learning experiences. Handouts collected included instructions for accessing specific trainings, notices, and reports regarding CYPAs progress on their annual individual development plans (IDP). Power point presentations were shared as artifacts during the focus group interviews as well as during informal conversations. These handouts and power point presentations were examples and insight to the various learning experiences and common training practices CYPAs encountered.

Various classroom manipulatives and toys such as jumbo pencils, charts, blocks, crayons, and books, were among other artifacts. During the focus group, CYPAs individually shared the artifacts they selected and identified as representations of who they were and what they did as
early childhood professionals. As each participant concluded sharing their artifacts other CYPAs responded by agreeing, conferring, and in some cases adding to what had been expressed. These artifacts CYPAs brought served as tools for clarifying, supporting, and illustrating how CYPAs individually as well as collectively engaged in learning and constructed their identities as early childhood professionals.

**Researcher Journaling**

At the start of the study, I chose to journal as a way to reflect on my own thoughts, feelings, expectations, and biases as I entered into the world of CYPAs at QCDC. My journal revealed my own thoughts and life experiences. I answered the questions posed to the participants as a way to uncover my own viewpoint. I also reflected and answered the following questions: What are my researcher biases, assumptions, and positions as an early childhood educator? According to van Manen (1990):

> It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even turn this knowledge against itself… (p. 47).

I utilized my researcher journal as a form of bracketing that served as a way for me to be open and explicit about the way I understood my participants learning experiences, professional identity construction, and any other beliefs I may possessed (see appendix E for entries). DeMarrais (2004) states that when the researcher answers the same questions as the participants it is posed as a bracketing interview. While conducting this study, I was intentional about allowing, requiring myself to capture my thoughts about CYPAs’ learning experiences as well as
their construction of professional identities. Journaling also was as a way to partially bracket my biases assumptions and assist me in self-monitoring during data collection and analysis.

Collecting multiple forms of data served as basis and foundation to help in the data analysis stage as I worked to provide rich and thick descriptions using various sources to aid in the exploration and interpretation of CYPAs’ personal and professional learning and the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

Data Analysis

Coding

The process of data analysis for this study was ongoing. The data analysis process began as I collected data and continued until I concluded writing my findings. I began preliminary data analysis in the beginning stages of this study. My preliminary analysis came from my field notes that were descriptions of the context, QCDC, my research site. As I progressed in my study, I was able to rely on other sources of data to assist me in gaining a deeper understanding of CYPAs’ learning and professional identities construction. In what follows, I describe the approaches I used for analyzing data.

I began the process of thematic analysis using methods outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) and van Manen (1984, 1990). Both stress the importance of beginning data analysis by first listening and reading over each text several times in what they refer to as close readings. Van Manen (1984, 1990) also suggest while conducting these close readings that one should look at them as a way to answer the question “What statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the experience being described?” (p. 21). I began my data analysis by open coding of my field notes, interview transcripts, and artifacts. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) explain that in open coding the researcher carefully sifts through and
takes small sections of data and categorizes them by writing down words and or phrases that help in identifying and naming “specific analytic dimensions and categories “(p. 175).

I followed Emerson’s et al.’s guidelines for open coding and developed a total of 58 initial codes that included a range of concepts and topics related to CYPAs learning and identity constructions. Examples of initial codes include “military life”, “family”, watching kids”, “schooling” “ideas about community”, “learning with others”, “learning alone”, “learning at home”, “attitudes about learning at school”, “learning while at work-on the job” and so on. While working through the process of open coding was time consuming and at times frustrating I found that I became familiar with the data and it guided me in being clear and focused regarding my research. To illustrate this point, I will explain how the code “learning at school” guided me to important findings regarding CYPAs professional learning and professional identity construction. The explanation that follows also illustrates the procedures I applied as I analyzed all data.

When I began collecting data for this study my main focus was on CYPAs’ professional identity construction and their personal and professional learning. As I started open coding I realized that the code “learning at school/college” continue to appear in CYPAs’ individual interviews, in informal conversations, and in the focus group. In order to better understand of what was being talked about regarding learning at school I created a table (see below) with excerpts from interviews where CYPAs talked about learning that happened at school/college settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes about school/college learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “Experience vs Degree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Attitudes/beliefs about learning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Learning alone”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Types of learning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Learning with others”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nicla My take on that is, a degree is good to have. What I would say is I don’t disagree with no one having a degree. I do think though that sometimes experience outweighs a degree. OK, you can have a Master’s degree coming fresh out of college, and you’re coming into the school system or you’re coming into CYS, but I’ve been there 10 years, and I’ve got more experience in what I’m doing the job for degree which you have. You’re coming in, yes you have the degree, but you’ve got to come in and I’ve got to train you because there are things that that degree didn’t teach you that need to be done at CYS. Sometimes I feel like the degree is good, yes, but experience outweighs degree a lot of times. It doesn’t make me feel good or valued. I’m OK, it is just that I have trained people with Master’s and Bachelor’s degree and all that. They’re coming in, yes, they have the knowledge of what they went to school for, but they don’t have it for what we’re doing at CYS. With you coming in, “Oh, I got a Bachelor’s, I got a Master’s”. It doesn’t bother me, but right now, your Bachelor’s or your Master’s, put it aside right now, I need to train you how to do this right here. We’re here to care for these children and we got to do it in the correct way.

Isela Sometimes it's good. I don't have the degree, but I have the experience. People have degrees and don't know what to do with it when they get here. It is important for people to understand that. One time, we had a girl who had degrees in everything, but she didn't know what she was doing. I understand you may have school but that is not enough for this. You have to get in here and learn work with people who are professionals and have been doing this. You can't just come in here just because you have this paper think you are it. Doing it right there in the class with others and then learning from the training helps. I know because I never went to college. Even when I had my own center, with the little workshops I learned so much and it was exactly what was needed.

Stela Yes, that's her job. Sometimes, she's not able to do it because we get so busy with the babies. That's one of the responsibilities that we give her, and she's been keeping it. Also, we have Ms. Sommer who is also new. We're teaching her everything because she has her Bachelors, she's been in the school district. So, she never went with the babies like we do here, but she's good. She is learning what we are doing, she is right there trying what we do. This is a day-to-day learning process, we learn when we work and do it.

Layken School is important. I loved going to school. When I was in high school I didn’t care, nobody pushed me. So I was a straight C student. In college I got a 4.0. So I said I definitely want to push to be the best that I can be, and I feel the more educated I am the better I can do my job be more professional and in turn be better prepared to help the children, the better I can help their families. That’s why I want to go back to school because I think it does help a lot.

The table above presents data from the interviews with the participants. In the selected excerpts, participants were describing their attitudes regarding learning that occurs in colleges. Using the one of my main theories guiding this study, situated learning, I found that CYPAs
respected and understood the value of degrees as a result of formal degree learning but thy also knew that in their particular context situated learning was appropriate and a valued form of learning. As they spoke they expressed their attitudes and beliefs that learning. CYPAs’ attitudes about learning revealed the importance of being able to construct who they are as CYPAs through learning that occurred as a community. The process of open coding then guided me to see connections between CYPAs learning and their professional identities construction. Having found that, I moved to focused coding—the second stage of data analysis. During this stage I went back to the transcripts, field notes, journal entries, and documents. This time I focused my attention on looking for how CYPAs attitudes about school/college learning were supported or discouraged. I began again by going line-by-line; however, this time around I looked for patterns, relationships, and instances that did not follow patterns. To assist me during this stage I created a table similar to the one above and I bolded instances that that encouraged or discouraged the participants’ beliefs and attitudes regarding school learning.

The procedures described in the above were applied to all transcribed interviews, field notes, and textual artifacts. As I worked through the data analysis process the creation of tables such as the one above helped me as I sorted through data as well as in the process of data triangulation.

As I approached my data collection, I was aware that they may have been issues associated with gender and race. While working at the CDC and as I collected data, I was fully aware that the CYPAs in my study were all minoritized women. As a researcher of color, I initially assumed there would be race and gender issues that I would need to attend to and discuss through my research. In being aware and cognizant about the potential for there to be discussion and possibly issues associated with gender and race, I was purposeful and intentional.
in making several subtle attempts during both individual and group interviews to probe and encourage participants to talk about these potential issues. As I probed, what I experienced was participants’ transparency regarding their awareness that there were few men that worked at the CDC in any capacity, especially as CYPAs, as well as their awareness of the fact that the women who were CYPAs were women of color. Upon further inquiry, I asked participants if they thought that these factors had any impact on the construction of their professional identities, whether it be how they constructed themselves or how they were positioned and constructed as professionals. To my surprise, my participants were upfront and transparent in explaining that they could see how these factors could have an impact; however, for them what was most impactful were their personal and professional learning experiences that really shaped who they were and what they did as early childhood professionals working at the CDC.

In an attempt to be respectful, and honest in my research, I was careful to honor the voices and wishes of my participants by suspending my own assumptions and interpretations regarding the impact of race and gender on the construction of my participants’ professional identities. I intentionally and explicitly asked them to read and critique my data analysis and findings as a way to ensure that I highlighted, attended to, and most of all presented their stories in a way that was acceptable and pleasing to them.

Summary

In this chapter I described this study’s methodological framework: phenomenological case study. Additionally, I provided descriptions of the research context, participants, data collection tools and analysis process. I also explicitly discussed my positionality in term of how my experiences as an early childhood professional and practitioner as well as my long-standing relationship with QCDC and many of the CYPAs located me in my study. Finally, I discussed
my process for obtaining trustworthiness and representation of my participants’ voices. In the following chapters, I present and analyze data collected during my field work.
Chapter 4: CYPAs’ Personal Learning Experiences

This study examined how CYPAs on a military installation constructed their professional identities as early childhood professionals. From a sociocultural identity constructivist perspective, I wanted to explore specifically the personal and professional learning experiences that have impacted the constructions of CYPAs professional identities as early childhood professionals. This chapter will focus on and present personal learning experiences that impacted the construction of CYPAs identities as early childhood professionals.

Identities are the imaginings of selves in worlds that are occupied by action, as social products; they are lived in and through activity and are developed through social practice but are also constructed over the course of a person’s life time (Holland et. al, 1998). In this chapter, as CYPAs shared their personal experiences that impacted the construction of their professional identities, what emerged were a variety of narratives that illustrated the complexity of CYPAs’ professional identities, as well as the intricate parts and details that go into the way in which they constructed their professional identities.

As means for exploring and understanding the way in which these intricate personal narratives impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities, I used figured worlds, communities of practice, apprenticeship, and situated learning theories to understand, make sense, and analyze CYPAs’s personal experiences in connection to the construction of their professional identities. Figured worlds served as a tool for understanding the social context of CYPAs learning as they worked as early childhood professional on a military installations CDC. The figured worlds was the space or “figured world” where CYPAs encountered and were a part of situated and social learning. Means for exploring the learning CYPAs spoke were the social learning theories communities of practice and situated learning. These were resources that aided
in exploring and drawing attention to what was said about engagement, participation, and co-construction in actual contexts aspects of learning.

As a component of social practice, learning is not isolated but it encompasses an entire person, it is not only concerned with learning in connection to the actual activity but in connection to social communities as well (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this case CYPAs learning was not solitary, individual, or isolated rather it is social, they learned while interacting with each other through shared activities and through language, as they discussed, shared knowledge, and problem-solved during a variety of these tasks (Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989). Social learning theories aided in the understanding that the learning and knowledge CYPAs constructed as a part of particular activities, in a particular contexts, and among unique cultures situated learning goes a step further and sheds light on how people obtain knowledge, and skills.

CYPAs that participated in this study were spouses of military service-members, dependents of military service-members, and in one case both. Their connection and affiliations with the military these CYPAs experienced relocating frequently, or as they say in the military, PCSing (permanently changing stations). Due to frequent PCS moves, only two of the nine participants possessed degrees as a result of formal post-secondary education. Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that often times who a person is thought of professionally is limited to their formal schooling and education however learning is not isolated to a specific task but it includes the entire person and is relational to social communities. In this case apprenticeship and communities of practice both provided a lens for understanding that while the learning CYPAs talked about was social, these were specific “vehicles” that help make sense of the way in which skills and knowledge were transmitted in the personal experiences they shared. They both also help to make clear the construction of their professional identities were also impacted not from
formal education but also from “the entire person and relational communities” they talked about during their narratives.

Apprenticeship helped as I worked to understand how their experiences made obvious the social nature of learning and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in regards to the unique set of skills, practices, and knowledge for being early childhood professionals. Through apprenticeship CYPAs narratives about learning made clear the process of work, and it allowed for the overall understanding of how learning occurred through activities that were physical, tangible, and made the abstract concrete (Collins, Holum, & Brown, 1991).

Communities of Practices served as a lens for identifying and understanding CYPAs personal experiences that were demonstrative of instances where learning was social and it developed naturally due to members' common interest in a specific domain. Communities of practice proved useful for meaning making when it came to instances in which CYPAs talked about working with others and being involved in practices such as information sharing where all members learn from each other through meaningful exchanges all while developing personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Situated learning was helpful in that it called for attention to paid for instances where learning that took place in the same context in which it was to be applied. It guided me to be aware of learning that was a sociocultural phenomenon as opposed to the work and action of a single individual working to gain general basic information from a decontextualized setting (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kirshner, & Whitson, 1997). In this aspect situated learning helped in the exploration and sense-making regarding how CYPAs acquired specific skills while focusing and attending to the relationships between learning and the social context in which it was happening.
The past experiences of our personal lives have a way of shaping and impacting who we are and how we view ourselves as professionals. This was expressed through the stories participants shared as they reflected on personal learning experiences that had an impact on the construction of their own professional identities as early childhood professionals. When participants were asked to share and elaborate on personal learning experiences that they saw as having an impact for being early childhood professionals, from their own voices, they referred to instances involving their family, volunteering, and babysitting experiences, all of which served as preparation and training that taught them skills, qualities, and practices to be the early childhood professionals they consider themselves to be.

In this chapter I will present the voices of CYPAs as they shared personal experiences they identified as impactful for the construction of who they were as early childhood professionals. After presenting and analyzing data, I will conclude the chapter with a discussion about skills and knowledge CYPAs acquired through their personal experiences as well as how CYPAs learned they skills and knowledge impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

**Being a Part of a Family**

A personal learning experience that participants identified as having an impact on how they construct their professional identities as early childhood professionals was being a part of a family. Four participants shared stories and discussed their roles, birth order, and responsibilities as members of families, comparing and contrasting what they did as members of family to the work they did as CYPAs on a military installation as early childhood professionals. First, Nicla explained that it was her membership of a large family and being one of the youngest of a family of 14 that started it all for her. She explained that by being younger she was expected to help her mother care for her nieces and nephews while her older siblings were working. She also talked
about how it was through being able to watch her mom care and interact with her siblings and their children that served as the basis for her knowing what it looked like and how to go about caring for children in what she considered a professional manner.

Nicla: I’m from a big family, 14. My sister and I, we were left to care for the grandchildren. When the older ones, they would go to work, they would drop off, especially in the summertime, they would drop their children off so that we could care for their children. That’s how it all started. At that point, there were so many grandchildren, me and my sister would always say, “We’re not going to ever have children”. That’s how it all started.

People learn from each other, through observation, imitation, and modeling (Collins, Brown, & Newman 1988). Nicla talked about her knowing what it looked like to be an early childhood professional because she was put in the position and context of working with her sister to step in and care for her nieces, and nephews. As we continued to talk and I asked Nicla about how she knew how to be the early childhood professional she was, she again referred to her family and added that by observing her mother as she worked with the children she also learned how to care for the children in her family. She talked about how her mother made an impact on her by providing explicit guidance for how to care for children from a very early age. Nicla talked developing her skills and knowledge of being an early childhood professional and acquiring skills and techniques for caring for children through being able to not only observe but participate in the process of caring for children alongside her mother and sister. Nicla’s memory revealed the impact her mother and sister had on her and how those memories of learning play apart in how she constructed herself professionally. This served as an illustration of Nicla’s learning as a part of an apprenticeship in situated learning (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1988;
Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1987). Nicla also talked about how she used what she already knew to then build upon, create, and develop her own methods for working with young children at the CDC.

Nicla: It all starts from watching my mom, as a child. My mom, with the 14 children, and how she cared for them and how she cared for the grandchildren, with her telling me “Do it this way, do it that way. Yeah, you know, she was older, and I followed what her footsteps of doing things. Then, me, my own self, I just developed a way of doing things for my way, to work with children. It all falls back down, and you might say that, "Oh, I talk about my mom but a lot. But, a lot of my ways and my learning, it starts with watching my mom and the way she did things, and getting up in the morning, the morning you know what my first thing, that I do in the morning. I get up, prepare myself, mentally."

Here, Nicla took it a step further in not only doing what her mom taught her to do but also then using what she learned to utilize cognitive and metacognitive resources for being able to use, manage, discover, and create knowledge from what she was taught during her apprenticeship with her sister under her mother (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1988; Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1987). As Nicla talked about how she learned to be a professional she mentioned learning through participation, and being involved in activities that were contextualized, meaningful, and relevant for caring for children. Situated learning is a product of being able to create meaning and coming to understandings from real, relevant activities that are associated with everyday living (Lave & Wenger, 1991). During this interview Nicla never talked about her own learning in the context of a classroom or in formal institutions, but what she
did talk about was her own life experiences which served as an all-encompassing classroom with her mother being the teacher. Nicla learned about being an early childhood professional through modeling, reflecting, scaffolding, practice, active participation, and engagement in real life situations.

Like Nicla, Tee also referred to family as she shared personal experiences that impacted her identity construction as an early childhood professional. Tee, an infant staff originally from Africa, shared that it was a common practice for different family members to help each when it came to needing assistance in caring and rearing children.

Tee: OK. To start with, when I was back home, you were from a big, close, family. If you’re in a family, some family members are richer than some. If you’re rich, you take your sister’s child that she can’t support. I kind of grow up with my cousin, yes. I spend my whole life with my cousin. I was taking care of his kids when I was little, when I was really little, when I was about 12 years old, I was taking care of his kids. I wasn’t taking care of the kids because I know how to do it. I just like use my imagination, yes, to bring up the kids. Most of the time my brother was away, he was not there. I took care of the children like they’re mine. That is how I see the children I care for at the CDC. I treat them like they are my own babies. I love them and I want the best for them. I have a connection, a bond, with them I am more than just watching them, I love them, and they are my family too.

Tee shared that where she was from, it was common for family members that had better financial situations than others to take in less fortunate family members to care and support their
children. Tee talked about her own experience growing up with her cousin and taking care of her children. She explains that she wasn’t left to care for the children because she was knowledgeable about how to do so but she used her imagination. Tee cared and treated her cousins as if they were her own children. When Tee was put in the situation of acting as a caregiver for her cousins she not sure what she was “supposed” to do in order to care for her cousins so she relied on her own instinct. She decided to act in a way that she deemed according to what the situation required of her. Within figured worlds, individuals’ identities can develop or be assigned through their interaction with “specific practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed worlds can be complex and contradictory” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 7). Although it was culturally “normal” for family members to serves as caregivers Tee expressed she did not feel equipped initially to care for her cousins. However, it was this positioning as a caregiver over her cousins that served as learning experience for how she deemed appropriate to treat children she cared for, this experience also served as an opportunity to engage in childcare and make decision regarding what she deemed as important when it came to caring for children as a professional. As Tee recalled this experience she also made explicit connections in the same way she viewed, loved, and cared for her cousins the way she treated and behaved with the children she cared for in the CDC. As a CYPA Tee drew from and mapped her identity from her personal family life onto her workplace where she also cared for children as family.

In relation to being a part of a family, Stela, another CYPA, spoke about her personal history, experiences, and participation with being a middle child and having certain responsibilities from her mother served as a major “recruitment” and push towards joining the field of childcare and early childhood education.
Stela: I think being a middle child. I was always helping Mama with the little ones
and the other ones, because in my house there were two girls — older ones —
and then five boys, and then I was the middle child. So, in the family, I used
to help a lot, I helped my mom, with the little ones, because they were
smaller, so I think Mama gave me a lot of responsibility, having so many
12 of us. So, helping with Mom to take care them while she was cooking,
while she was washing, while she was doing everything that she was doing so
much. Yeah. So, she gave me that responsibility to be taking care of the
babies while she was busy cooking for us. I think that’s the main thing. That’s
why I always liked the kids. Babies. I feed the baby, keep the babies clean, my
favorite is talking and teaching the babies things by playing. I keep the babies
busy by reading and pointing and pictures in the few books we had. I had to
make due, I had to improvise with what we had, and I made up a lot of things
to do so the babies could still learn.

On the surface it seemed as if Stela was simply taking on the role of her mother’s helper or
assistant. A closer look however revealed that Stela was in the midst of engaging in day-to day
activities and tasks all while learning and acquiring knowledge directly connected to who she
would be and the work she would do later as a CYPA. Stela’s story revealed that from a young
age she positioned and viewed herself as a “helper” or “assistant” in relation to her mother.
Additionally, the day to day interactions, encounters, and assigned tasks given to Stela by her
mother served as the “work” and construction part of her identity.

In addition to her positionality what also emerged was Stela realization that the work she
did as her mother’s helper served as learning that was situated in the actual practice of care and
educating young children. It was these instances of situated learning that also prepared her to engage, participate, and construct who she was professionally and her enactment as an early childhood professional.

Stela: I see now that that’s why I went through that. All those things, those responsibilities, help me now. I do these things, and I feel good about the things that I do, I help the babies learn and it is easy for me. I have been doing this a long time. My momma showed me how to do it. She sat with me, watched me, let me try and then told me when I did good, and how I can do it better. I know it is a little different at the CDC but I had a good teacher and already practiced a lot from the time I was a little girl and I help momma. I feel like I make little changes here at the CDC but I am not afraid and I feel good because I have been doing this for so long.

Stela talked about being born into helping her mother because she was a middle child. Stela saw that her mother needed help and it was just a part of family life for her to help her mother while she took care of the domestic tasks (e.g. cooking and washing). Stela learned in context, her learning to help her mother was situated. She explained it was her responsibility to care for the babies while her mother cooked. Stela had to make due or “improvise” with what she had and with what she already knew in order to care for the children. Stela also connected her responsibilities as a child with her interest with children, specifically babies. Stela drew and connected how her previous interaction with her siblings impacted her by preparing her for what she does as a CYPA early childhood professional. The way she talked her learning and preparation process for becoming a professional was similar to Lave & Wenger’s (1991) learning through apprenticeship. She talked about her own learning as being contextual, situated,
participatory, and under the supervision of her mother. She pointed out that her mother took the time to not only scaffold and model what to do with the babies, but she also provided guidance, feedback, and support. Stela looked at the responsibilities she had as a middle child as a means for her being exposed to acquiring skills relevant to being knowledgeable about what to do with children and how to do it. Stela specifically mentioned practices such as reading, pointing to pictures, talking, and improvising as things she did as a child caring for her siblings as well as tasks she did as an early childhood professional. Stela explicitly stated she was aware that what she did at the CDC differed from what she did while caring for her younger siblings. However, Stela utilized spoke of working with her mother as an experience that served as an assistance and influence her identity construction as a CYPA early childhood professional. Stela drew on her own prior knowledge for what she needed to do and how to do it as an early childhood professional. Stela provided another example of a CYPA’s reflection on past experiences and the way in aids in the construction of their professional identities.

During our first interview, I asked Mary to reflect on her past and talk about instances from her past that she felt impacted her being a CYPA early childhood professional. Mary, with no hesitation, responded “my family”. She talked about looking back and seeing how her family played a major role in who she is and how she sees herself professionally.

Mary: My family! Yes, well we came from a family with a lot of children. I have a lot of nephews and nieces. I always had to take care of my nephews. One of my sisters was living in Houston when she was by herself. She had no family or anything. She asked me if I could go with her to help with her two boys that she had. So, I went with her, and I was helping to do everything with her two boys. I have always liked children and babies. So, I was doing almost
everything with kids. Feeding, changing, playing, helping them grow and develop and learn. I was with them but I did more than to just sit and sit and hold them or put them in front of the T.V. No, during those times I learned how to do activities with them and teach them, colors, numbers, shapes, and many things.

As Mary talked about her family she also spoke about her own learning in terms of becoming a caregiver and actively engaging in caregiving by learning to appropriate practices that are associated with caregiving and early childhood care and education. Mary like Stela, Tee, and Nicla each shared similar stories of how various tasks and activities they engaged in while being a part of families positioned them as “apprentices “(Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the figured world of family. Mary identified specific practices, “Feeding, changing, playing, helping them grow and develop and learn” as embedded activities and practices that are central to understanding the figured world of family. Mary came to the realization that the skills and knowledge she acquired as an “actor” in the figured world of families impacted the construction of her identity as an early childhood professional by equipping her with many of the skills and knowledge needed to be identified as a professional in the world of early childhood.

Later in the interview, when asked to think about those experiences related to being with her nephews and actually becoming a professional in the field of early childhood, Mary recalled helping a good friend who ended up being a teenage mother.

Mary: I think it was one of my friends, who was my age, which got pregnant. She was so young. She was about 16, I think. These days, getting pregnant at that age is nothing, but in those days, in Mexico, it was a big deal. I remember her parents were very hard on her. I used to help her with her baby. We were and
are family. I became the godmother of the baby. Helping her and being so young, I thought, "It's not that hard to take care of a baby," not that I wanted a baby but it stated me to think about working with children as a profession. Being able to help children who may have mommies and daddies in a similar situation. It also help me think about when I got married, I really didn't want babies right away. So, that's when I really thought about working with babies.

Mary reflected and shared that she became the godmother of her friend’s child because of the role she played in her and the child’s life. She later in informal conversations, comes back to how she had continued contact with her friend and that the baby is all grown up. She said several times that the baby was like a part of her immediate family, like she was the momma too. She also talked remembering how hard and cold the girl’s parents were. Mary shared that she felt bad for her friend, but more so the baby. She expressed her concern for them both is what led to being around them so much. As Mary talked more and more about her experience with being a god-mother she began reflecting on the relationship had on her coming to realize that she was in no hurry to be a mother, but that she enjoyed the idea of caring for a child or children. Mary shared this experience and her thoughts regarding married and having children as because it served as background for her being able to offer an explanation and justification for when and why she “really thought about working with babies”. This shared narrative helps in the understanding and meaning making regarding about who Mary was and what experiences impacted her professional identity construction. In this case, Mary’s taking on the role and identity as a god-mother served as a “precursor to her participation in the more institutionalized life” (Holland et. al, 1998, p. 51) and role of a CYPA and early childhood professional. As Mary continued she came to the realization that being a god-mother caused a “refiguring” or
reconstructing of her identity and position in the friendship in relation to her friend. Mary’s figured world of family grew and gained two members, her 16-year-old friend and her baby. Mary no longer considered them to be friends, when her friend had the baby and named Mary god-mother was the event that shifted Mary from seeing her as a friend and allowed her to say that “we were family and are family”. Mary’s learning about caregiving happened in practice as she took on the identity of being a god-mother. As Mary shared her experience, a story about her own learning that occurred as she participated in what was to her an everyday normal activity, her learning was ubiquitous as part on this on-going activity of caring for her god-child (Lave, 1993, p.5). Here another example of learning socially can be seen. It was the social interaction and active engagement with a child that provided real, relevant, and engaging contexts and active participation in the learning process of working towards the acquiring of skills and practiced needed to construct ones-self as an early childhood professional.

As CYPAs continued to reflect and think about their own personal experiences and the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals babysitting was another theme that emerged.

**Babysitting**

In addition to CYPAs sharing personal experiences of how being a part of the figured world of a family acted as recruitment and provided a plethora of opportunities to engage in the social learning processes of communities of practice, situated learning and apprenticeship also impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals by preparing them for the work they did as CYPAs. Like being a member a part of a family, babysitting, was identified by Ro and Mary as being important and a key component in attributing to how they construct who they are as early childhood professionals was babysitting. When participants were asked to share as much as they could recall about their pasts up until becoming a CYPA,
including any formal or informal learning experiences, babysitting was discussed by two participants. Ro and Mary shared what they learned from their experiences of babysitting siblings, cousins, and children of their parents’ close friends. When discussing babysitting, they shared how through babysitting they formed important long-lasting relationships in addition to learning various skills, qualities, and knowledge they now deem as essential for who they are as early childhood professionals. They explained that through experiences they learned how to do more than just watch a child/children. They reflected and compared what they did as babysitters to the work they currently do as CYPAs. Ro and Mary identified babysitting as a form of training and space for experimenting and learning about caring for and teaching children through actual practice.

During our first interview Ro openly admitted that prior to our conversation that no one ever asked her nor had she ever thought about how experiences in her past impacted what she currently does and how she constructed who was as a CYPA early childhood professional. After taking time to think, Ro identified babysitting as a personal experience that impacted her professional identity construction. She recalled a specific incident when her aunt went out of town and paid her to babysit her four cousins. She explained that while babysitting she was in charge of the children and she bathed, fed, and cared for the four of them. In hopes of better understanding the impact babysitting had on her professional identity construction, later in the interview, I revisited Ro’s mentioning of babysitting and asked her if she didn’t mind telling me more about her experience. Ro went into more detail regarding her reflection on her experiences of babysitting and more specifically how she saw it as learning that played a part in constructing her identity as an early childhood professional.

Ro: It was the sitting. It was preparing me. If you really think about it because it
taught me the development of children. The first thing people think about babysitting I’m sitting on the couch and I’m watching TV but I wasn’t that kind of a caregiver. You know what I’m saying. I said I was on the ground playing with them, cooking. We set tables. I even have bathed children before. I have done a number of things that I did not realize that I’m doing now that actually really are like what I do as CYPA, every day now. Hmm.

Ro’s babysitting served as a contextual situation for learning about the actual development of children. She actively engaged in the practice of interacting with the children she was in charge of. Babysitting implies watching a child, and Ro made sure to express her objection to the term and offer a picture of what she did in contrast to the implication of the word. She was able to offer specific task associated with caregiving for children as opposed to simply sitting and watching children. She learned and practiced skills through her active engagement while participating in the social practice of babysitting. The ending of the excerpt provides insight for how her own reflection that allowed connections to be made in regards to what she used to do while babysitting and does as a CYPA. The exchange allowed her to identify her previous experiences with babysitting as knowledge and see the influence and impact it had on the way she “acts or performs” as a CYPA early childhood professional at the CDC.

Like Ro, Mary also took a moment to recall experiences that impacted the construction of her identity as an early childhood professional. Also like Ro, Mary shared that babysitting was an experience that served as a situated learning by being in the context of caring for a child or children all while being acclimated, to tasks, practices, skills, and knowledge that were needed for their work as babysitters but also prepared them for the work they would do and the people they would be as CYPA early childhood professionals. As Mary thought, she began to recall an
instance of babysitting for a woman her sister knew. Like Ro, as Mary shared she too made connections between babysitting and the work she did as a CYPA early childhood professional.

Mary: My family. We came from a family with a lot of children. I have a lot of nephews and nieces. I always had to take care of my nephews. One of my sisters was living in Houston when she was by herself. She had no family or anything. She asked me if I could go with her to help with her two boys that she had. So, I went with her, and I was helping to do everything with her two boys. I always liked children and babies. So, I was doing almost everything with kids. Also, when I was there helping with my two nephews, I worked with a lady over there babysitting a baby. I wasn't doing anything other than with the baby. The lady just wanted me to watch the baby. She said, "Don't do anything. I just want you to take care of the baby." So, I was taking care of the baby. Bathing, feeding, talking, reading, singing to the baby things like that.

Some of the same things I do now as a CYPA.

When Mary is asked to recall experiences that she felt prepared her to be a CYPA early childhood professional she referred to babysitting for a family friend while also assisting her sister care for her children. Mary came to the realization that many of the skills she acquired and engaged in as a babysitter was not an isolated wasted meaningless instance, rather babysitting served as situated training and preparation for what she later did as an early childhood professional at the CDC. When asked specifically about experiences that she felt had a role in preparing for being the professional she talked about babysitting and stated that “she wasn’t doing anything other than being with the baby” she initially down plays her role. She framed what she did while babysitting as in making light of what she was doing, however she then takes
the time to provide details about the specific tasks involved in the actual care of baby. As both Mary and Ro talked about these experiences, they both made connections between what they actually did while babysitting (i.e. bathing, feeding, talking, reading, and singing to the baby) and the day-to-day practices, activities, and tasks associated with being an early childhood professional.

Both Mary and Ro spoke about babysitting as learning and preparation that occurred while actively participating and practicing in situations and context that were authentic. As they talked about these instances they talked about actually being situated within the learning experience, and knowledge acquisition became a part of the learning activity, the context, and the overall environment where it was developed and then used (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These examples illustrated how these two CYPAs were actively involved in engaging and addressing real world situations.

**Volunteering**

When interviewing CYPAs another reoccurring theme mentioned in great detail by three participants, Ro, Stela, and Layken, was volunteering. When asked to think on personal experiences that they feel helped shape how they see themselves as professionals in the early childhood field, Ro and Stela both recalled quite a bit about various times they volunteered.

In an early interview, Ro shared that she began volunteering at a Head Start, Kids Corp, initially because that was the pre-school her oldest children attended and she believed it was important to be aware of what was going with her children.

Ro: I went to a Head Start, a kid’s corps which was located outside the base facilities. So once I started going there, I learned so much and the reason I applied there is because that’s the same pre-school that my oldest two went to. So I was volunteered. So I was always in there volunteering and just
seeing the realm of things. I volunteered because my child went there, and I’m always volunteering anything that my children would do. One is because if I’m sitting here doing own thing I don’t know what’s going on in that environment. If something occurs then how am I going to get so upset if I never took the initiative to even go and check it out? So I’m always volunteering within my children’s facilities, and because I volunteer so much, I was like you know what I really like what is going on here. I think I want to be a part of that program, I want to be like them, doing what they do. They’re teaching and learning all kinds of stuff, they look like professionals not just some kind of sitters.

Ro positioned herself as a learner and unofficial early childhood professional early on. Her thoughts revealed that she had always been and continued to be committed to volunteering when it comes to activities her children are a part of. She explained that her thought process is that “If I’m sitting here doing own thing I don’t know what’s going on in that environment. If something occurs then how am I going to get so upset if I never took the initiative to even go and check it out?” Eventually after much involvement in volunteering Ro made the transition from being a parent volunteer to actually becoming part of the staff at the Head Start. Her reflection revealed that volunteering actually prepared and acclimated her to practices that are a part of the identities of early childhood professionals. Ro approached the figured world of early childhood professionals as a part but through interaction, learning, and working with others (both teachers and other parents) she was in the midst of the being recruited into this figured world. Her engagements with volunteering were where she became an apprentice and was able to actively engage and learn the tricks of the trade of early childhood profession from the professionals as
well as other members that were in the recruitment phase. When asked what was it that she saw during volunteering that attracted her to being a part of the profession, she shared that it was a variety of factors, but she reported that it was overall enjoyable and there was an overall tone and atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and encouragement to learn with your kids, for your kids, and most of all for yourself.

As Ro continued to share her experience as a volunteer at the Head Start, in the same interview she also talked about the way learning occurred and this impacted her desire to become a member of the early childhood profession as well as how it impacted how she constructed herself as an early childhood professional.

Ro: There was like a sense of like the warmth and community vibe about how they were with the kids but with each other and us, the volunteers, too! I was important as a parent and just as important as a volunteer. They didn’t let me go out there helping looking all crazy like. Like we really went to training and workshops and learned about how to carry ourselves so that we aren’t looked at just to be a babysitter or filler inner but like we were important too. They needed us to help those kids learn and we had chances to learn and teach other volunteers and even the classroom teachers stuff we knew. That what made me want to really come aboard.

While having a mindset that being involved in her children’s education maybe what motivated Ro to begin volunteering we can see that volunteering became more. As Ro volunteered she had the opportunity to be a part of and engage in a variety of learning experiences that not only benefitted her as a parent and her children but it provided a window into what it is she wanted to be and do as a job/career. While volunteering Ro was able to see
and feel what it was like to be part of a community of learners focused on teaching and learning. Ro was recruited into the figured world of early childhood professional because she was groomed through her participation and interaction with as she engaged in learning the practices associated with the profession. It was through this experience that she was not recruited but also motivated to become a more active parent volunteering on a more consistent basis and eventually moving from bystander, to newcomer, and onward to old-timer through practice and engagement, she became a member of the early childhood profession by way of the Head Start program. Ro’s discourse illustrated that she constructed her professional identity when she spoke extensively and passionately about what she not only saw happening but was a part of as a volunteer. Ro’s discourse was explicit in stating that she wanted to become a part of the profession she saw and experienced as a volunteer. While volunteering she was invited into the “realm of things” that she previously was not privileged to as a parent. Being a volunteer created opportunities for working along the side of teachers, it also introduced her to practices, activities, and artifacts that were specific to the context of the Head Start. Ro no longer stood on the outside looking in. She now had access to the discourse of being a volunteer. The discourse she saw, encountered, and embodied as a volunteer later served as legitimate peripheral participation that aided in her ability to move from the position of a parent, to parent volunteer, and ultimately member. Ro also demonstrated her own agency as she talked about things she identified as flawed and troublesome. In an informal observation, during the children’s naptime she took time to explain to a new staff member challenges and obstacles they faced as early childhood professionals at the CDC. Ro, in comparison to the new staff members, now was positioned as a more experienced participant as opposed to newcomer. Ro gained this status based on her own legitimate peripheral participation. Ro openly admitted things were not perfect; however, she
explained the new staff that she found that she was still able to learn and teach about so many different things. She highlights that one of the most important lessons dealt with seeing that in that particular environment there was a certain level of respect for those that worked and taught children and for her that what was most important. Ro helped showed identities of being an early childhood professional was constructed based on what was seen, the experience associated with learning about practices and skills assigned to identities of early childhood professionals, and in the way individuals made meaning of what it meant to take on the role, characteristics and learning aspects of the overall discourse of early childhood professionals.

Stela also highlighted her own experiences with volunteering when asked to reflect on personal experiences that had an impact on her professional identity. Stela shared that she volunteered alongside her children’s teachers from the time the children were in pre-kinder until her youngest was in the 8th grade. She explained it was when her second child was in school full time that she realized that she really enjoyed assisting and working with the teachers and she made the decision to go back to become a teacher’s aide.

Stela: The volunteering. It was very important — they are going to school, and I volunteer, and from Pre-kinder to 8th grade in the school. So, I volunteer with the teachers. I will help them before school and after school, in class. I helped prepare supplies, the environment, and lessons. I was setting up the classroom and helping the children when they were in the class. I was able to sit with them and work with them as they read, write, do the math and other things with their lessons. That’s what I was liking to do when I was there, but once the second one, went to school all day long, I said, “I need to do something else.” So, what I like to do is helping them — the other teachers — and I like
that, so I went back to school to be a teacher’s aide. That’s when I started going back to school.

Like Ro, Stela’s concern and belief in being actively involved in her children’s education is what initially put her in the position to volunteer at her children’s school. Stela’s volunteering for nine years (from pre-k to 8th grade) served as a period of recruitment, apprenticeship, and overall preparation that aided in the construction of her identity as an early childhood professional. While Ro and Stela both talked about the role of volunteering impacting them by leading them to do the work as early childhood professionals they differ in their step taken after volunteering. While Ro made the choice to seek membership into the community of early childhood professionals by transitioning from volunteer to practitioner, Stela took a different path and chose to go back to school to pursue a degree through formal degree learning to become a practitioner. Stela’s desire to be involved in her child’s education was the basis for her volunteering, and the actual experience of volunteering served as a tool for recruitment into the world of early childhood professional. Stela’s entrance into the world of volunteering exposed her to a variety of contextual practices associated with volunteering as well as with the figured world of early childhood professionals. Stela explicitly identified various practices and activities such as preparing supplies, the environment, and lessons in which she assisted. It was through these activities and practices that Stela moved from being just a mom that dropped off her children and stepped into the role and became a key actor in the world of “volunteering”. In this volunteering world, Stela was able to carry out these activities and practices associated with volunteering because of the refiguring and constructing of the relationship between her and her child’s teachers. She and the teacher(s) new relationship was one where her learning how to “become” a volunteer occurred through social interaction and Stela’s participation that
positioned her as the trainee that worked under the supervision of the “skilled” worker, the classroom teacher.

Later in the same interview, Stela referred to two other instances that she encountered while volunteering. In the first instance, Stela recalled crossing the path of another parent-volunteer that chose to work with children learning English as their second language. She explained that his motivation was his own son, a high school freshman reading on a second-grade level. Stela shares her admiration of how he worked with the parents and the children. She went on to later connect what she learned from this experiences with how it impacted and impacts her professionally.

Stela: This man was helping children with a second language, and he was doing this totally volunteer. He wasn’t getting paid for it. This guy was helping because he had a ninth-grader that was reading at the second-grade level — a learning disability that he had, the little boy. This program that he was doing, he was making it for his son.

Susan: How did you know about it?

Stela: So, this guy was inviting everybody who needed help.

Susan: To come and be a part of the program?

Stela: In that classroom, it was just him teaching to his son, so he was inviting people that had problems English, speaking. So, even for us, I was behind. I was volunteering but I was learning too.

Susan: Why does this stick out for you? Did or rather does this play any part in how you come to think of who you are as an early childhood professional?
Stela: Si, I mean yes, for me it was the way that he was teaching them, it was so different but we that we would get it also — the techniques. So, I learned that for my own daughter and children with the same issue of dyslexia there was special paper. He would put different colors on the paper for my daughter. Yellow was to help her concentrate more. They would give different colors, but for my daughter — and the finger. Just the finger, when you’re reading or you’re writing, so you don’t lose where you’re going. That’s one of the techniques that we learned with my daughter, to help her focus in reading, because she was having a lot of trouble, falling behind because of the disability. We even went to the school district. They didn’t haven’t anything. So for me I do those things like that with my babies? I know they are joven, young, but if I do it and show mommies and daddies and soon after seeing it over and over they do it too. This is one think I take from the volunteering and do. I have to use techniques to help my babies. I do more than just rock babies, that is important I want them to know I do love them but I teach them too, I show them I love them by teaching them things they need to know but we do it by using fun, song, dancing, playing but we are teaching them too. Ya sabes? You know?

Stela explains that part of her professional identity was impacted in part from a personal experience she had while volunteering. Stela recalled this incident while volunteering but what she drew from were techniques this other parent volunteer used. She shares that this was a man not only helping his child but other children and while doing so he also invited other parents and volunteers to be a part of what he was doing. She talks about his individual interest but she also
emphasizes he fact that he intentionally invited others. It is important to note that Stela included herself in being a part of the group that was described as being “behind”; however, in that same breath she explains that she was learning as well. She is explicit in connecting what she learned while volunteering and working with her own child to who she is and what she does as an early childhood professional. We can see how Stela uses what she learned in that particular context of her personal experiences as having an impact on how she works with children in her class. She shares that from that one instance she is cognizant and intentional about techniques to use with her babies. Specifically, Stela talks about how she intentionally uses her finger for keeping up when reading to her babies. She also goes a step further and talks about sharing techniques with her parents of the babies. Stela is explicit in explaining that she does and is more than just a person that keeps and rocks babies she establishes her credibility as a professional by explain that she loves her children and she illustrates that by teaching them using a variety of methods to equip and prepare them with various things they need to know. Stela’s discourse illustrated that she positioned herself as a professional because of the unique skill set she learned and used while working with young children. She also constructed her professional identity as an early childhood professional because like Ro, she had already been exposed to many of the customs, practices, and language while working as an apprentice under expert teachers and alongside other parent volunteers, apprentices.

The second volunteering instance Stela shared occurred while volunteering to work with a summer program her children attended provided through the city parks and recreation. As Stela talked about this experience her discourse emphasized the positive impact her participation in the parent volunteer communities of practice had. This communities of practice was not just a place for learning among other parents but it also served as a point of recruitment and entrance into the
early childhood professional figured world. Stela fondly described her learning as she described the types of interaction she experienced as she volunteered. In as informal conversation during her breaks, she also shared that it was one of her children’s teachers who encouraged and motivated her and other parents to continue to work together even outside of school and stay active and involved with what their children were doing. She explained that over the summer she and a group of the parent volunteers headed the teacher’s advice about working together to be actively involved with their children and they all decided that they would register their children for a summer program sponsored by the city parks and recreation. Stela recalled how excited and impressed she was with the way the program was operated, and she talked about how the program encouraged and relied on parental and community involvement. As Stela discussed her personal experience with volunteering what emerged from this was the importance and impact of a. learning as part of a group and b. personal experiences, such as being a parent volunteer, on the construction of professional identities.

Stela highlighted the idea of learning as a member of a group first, when she talked about the decision to have her children attend summer camp. Stela explained her involvement with the summer program began when one of her children’s teacher encouraged her to continue to volunteer as a way to continue to learn and be involved in her children’s education.

Stela: I didn’t — Miss Ceja, my babies’ teacher told me — “Miss Stela, this and this and this. Go to get involved, don’t stop, and still go. Send your babies to summer camp.” I talked with the other parents that were volunteering at the school and I say let’s take our kids here. We talk about what we need to do to get them sign up. I told them I would find out where to go and then another parent follow and say I find out what we have to have for registration and then
another parent say okay I ask the teachers about what we need to do and have for the childrens and when it start. Then we all meet, put the information together and decided we are all going to send our babies together. We went to the central hub together, and enrolled, because we were enrolling our children for the program.

While Stela shared this with me as a segue into explaining her introduction to becoming a parent-volunteer, she actually provided an illustration of being a part of a group and working together to learn and accomplish a task. Stela and the other parents worked together as a community of parents to gather information about their children attending camp and then used what they had gathered to make a decision regarding whether or not their children would attend summer camp. What is interesting is that when Stela shared explanation for her becoming involved as a parent volunteer she did not point out how each of the parents worked together to gather information and then came together to make a decision. Whenever Stela was asked about what made this particular instance so memorable and important she always has been adamant in identifying the she learns well when she is a part of a group, or a community. Here she provides an illustration what it looks like for organic community learning. Ironically as Stela shared how she became a parent volunteer she provides an example of a personal experience that centered on notion of learning as a member of a community. What can be seen is the importance of the group working towards a common goal. It was through this process of communities of practice that parents specifically Stela gained knowledge related to their children and their academic and social success. The supervising teacher encouraged the parents to continue working together as a way to motivate them to remain as a community of learners that not only learned from each other but depended on each other for their own success as well as the success of their children. The
parent community Stela described provided an illustration of learning that existed among the parents who were a group of individuals with a strong and shared bond and commitment to work as a community towards the construction of knowledge about how they could improve and enhance their children’s educational experiences. Stela stories tell of the strong connections between their collective social practices that interlocked them as individuals together. The community served as a source of support, collaboration, shared information and experiences. Serving in this capacity allowed the entire group to benefit and learn from one another as well as have opportunities to grow and develop.

Another example of the of connections between learning in communities of practice and identities arose as Stela talked about her and the other parents and their dispositions at the beginning of training for the camp. When asked to share her experience with being a parent volunteer Stela spoke of her enjoyment with working together to learn.

Stela: Like I said, my other parents, group of friends, we were always together and learning. We were always together. Yes. Then, “Let’s go take them to Summer Fun. We were just a big group of kids too. We sat in the back of the room at first. Everybody went together. We learned with each other, from each other. If some knew something the others didn’t, there was no competing. We share, we help each other. Those that know, they show us, we show each other we all learn together! That’s what important, if we are good and know then the children will be better, all of them.

Stela constructed herself and the other parents as a group of kids in the figured world of parent volunteers. Their practices of sitting together at the back of the room, going collectively as a group, learning together in communities were part of their discourse. They were individuals
that acted and constructed themselves as individuals a part of a collective. It was more than a group of parents just volunteering, Stela used the commonality of wanting to be together and wanting to learn in a particular way as a distinction, a marker that created an explicit difference between those individuals who were a part of the parent volunteer figured world and those who may have just been parents that volunteered.

In another instance, while talking about volunteering, Stela also took time to talk about what stuck with her as a parent volunteer. She shared that her time spent with the young man working with the parent volunteers impacted and still has an impact on what she does, how she does a lot of the things she does, and how she sees herself professionally. Stela mentioned that as an early childhood professional as well as infant room-lead that was responsible for teaching and training others to be early childhood professionals she recalled this specific experience and her admiration for how the young man approached teaching and learning for a group of individuals that were not his staff, but parents.

Stela: Also, summer school no program. I, we all took them to summer school, after — there was a program called Summer Fun. Summer Fun was a school but not really. I volunteered for the summer program also. At Summer Fun, we were in the recreation parks. No one of us, all of us! I did not know but I found out that we were going to do training. It was so beautiful, the way they were running the program. This little guy, who work with us, he came to us on roller skating with a big hat — different colors, different shapes — and we were sitting for the class instruction, and they were telling, How do you feel when you see somebody like this come in? — to teach us. He was a little guy.
The way that he was, young? — This is what you need to get attention from the kids. This is what you need to do. How do you feel when I roller-skate in, with this on my head?” Later on, he took a big thing, like a scenario, where you’re going to do puppets. Si! The theater. Beautiful, but it was just like an umbrella. It was made out of recyclables, but the thing that he would teach us, it was amazing. We were like this, and he showed us a video from the summer before. This is what we’re going to study. We’re going to have a talent show. This is what we do. This is how we do it. We practice. He say -This is what we’re going to be doing — activities for the little ones, in the summer. Table games, activity games, sewing, making dresses, making — he said, you want to have them active. Active. We’re going to plan for this week. We’re going to do swimming. Next week, we’re going to go roller skating. The next week, we’re going to the theater. We will have to have everything planned. When he was planning everything, it was so amazing. He did all the stuff at first, with our comments. Then we planned a little. Then by the end we were doing it together! This little boy, I guess he had so many years’ experience in that. He was a young guy. We were parents, volunteering, and we were not his staff.

Stela described her experience in terms of an apprenticeship. Even though the person in charge of training the parents was “little”, young, Stela’s discourse told a story that was very different than what she said initially. She initially described him as young which could be taken as inexperienced, however as she continued she spoke about the man, her supervisor, in terms of being more skilled, knowledgeable and having seniority. Stela highlighted that while volunteering one of her favorite components of the camp was the built-in hands on, situated,
learning and training. The apprenticeship served as activities that gave her the opportunity engage in activities and relevant engagement that equipped Stela with tools, resources, and confidence to move from being on the outer perimeter of the legitimate peripheral participation and moving towards being engaged as a full participant.

As Stela talked about being a parent volunteer she stated that experiences such as volunteering had an impact on her professional identity. In the data below, I asked her to elaborate on her experience as a volunteer and to help me understand the connections she saw between that experience and what she does and who she is as a professional. She compared and pointed out the overlap and the overall impact that existed between what she learned from the camp and the work she did as a CYPA early childhood professional.

Stela: Because there were no trainers, and we had to not just keep an eye on our babies, but keep an eye on everybody. It bonded them, us, together. The same thing we all had to do — keep in mind how many little heads you have, and how many you have still, or not, to take them back. I was a volunteer, but it was the same thing like what we do now for our babies in Summer Fun at the CDC. The director there would tell me, “You help at this table. You help at that table. You help on that.” We were on board with everything that we were doing as a preparation for the talent show at the end of the summer, and not just that. At the end of the summer, we’d have a big celebration. Just like we do at the CDC. A lot of things were the same things I’m doing now — I did it while there and I’m here, doing it for the center as a professional, but I can and already do things like this in a better way because I had learning there and did it for many years with them. They trained us and everything. That was
amazing, because I didn’t know that we just were not looking at the babies, and that’s it. There’s very much involvement in everything, and that’s why they welcome us. “You’ve got ideas? Give us ideas.” They say “Tell me what you like to do best. What do you like to do? What area do you like to do?” We go with what you like. We don’t put you in something that you don’t like, you know? That what makes me a professional I don’t just come to work and do things just out of blue. No I plan, I think what is best for my babies I plan I pay tension I make observation I document I take pictures I let parents know how their baby is doing, growing, and developing, problems I see things we can do to help the baby. So, I get that from leaning at places like the summer camp and volunteering at the school that’s what I used to do before I even knew I was going to be at the CDC. When we went to the park, we didn’t just go to the park. We had very many activities planned for the park. That is what I do now they are alike I can do this now because I did those things then.

Stela began by explaining that there were no designated administrative positions other than the director of the summer camp, unlike in the center where they have other positions such as assistant directors, mentors, and trainers. Stela spoke about the benefits and her enjoyment in learning as a part of a community. Learning, knowledge building, and sharing of information evolved naturally because of the participants shared interest in caring for and working with children for the summer program. Social interaction and learning went hand in hand. It was through the parent volunteers’ interaction with one another, practice and participation that served as the positioned them as more than just parents. Stela spoke positively about the relationship and work done with the people at the camp and the volunteers. The parent volunteer community
was a factor in making the staff and volunteers close. The organic community of practice that formed created an opened space for learning, sharing of tasks, knowledge, experiences, and provided a safe space for there to be accountability between members. As I conducted informal observations and had informal conversations with the participants there was a resounding issue of tension between themselves and administrators. This is key because at some point with each of the nine participants individually as well as during the focus groups there was mention of tensions, discomfort, and displeasure that existed between CDC facility administrators (director and assistant directors) and staff that negatively impacted CYPAs construction of their professional identities. CYPAs informally shared that these tensions often caused them to feel incompetent, underappreciated, and ineffective. Through the CYPAs discourses about their construction of their professional identities in the early childhood professional figured world they experienced difficulties and tensions from individuals that were in managerial and supervisory positions. On the contrary, Stela highlighted the positive experience of working with the director and trainer as well as with the staff at the camp as an impactful and positive experience. Stela also made positive connections between her experience with the summer camp staff and her own work as a CYPA early childhood professional. Another connection Stela made was between the celebrations at the end of the camp and the summer season at the CDC. Stela explicitly identified the end of camp celebration, and planning the activities, as things she did with the summer program that were similar and served as practice for what she does as a CYPA. Stela talked about tasks/points such as being creative, creating inviting and attention-grabbing environments, working and learning with others, keeping children active, and the importance of planning as key components of her professional job. She explained that she felt comfortable doing these types of tasks as a CYPA because of the practice she had as a parent volunteer. The manner in which
Stela recounted her experience of being a parent volunteer revealed that she had the opportunity to learn through a summer program important skills that she deemed as necessary and imperative to be able to be the early childhood professional she had become. Looking over my field notes, I was able to find several informal observations where Stela brought in various objects such as umbrellas, sunglasses, beach balls, and water bottles to use with the children. I also had the opportunity to be a part of one of her room meetings. While working in the room Stela explicitly verbalized to the other staff in the room the importance of making learning fun for the babies. She encouraged them to bring in items from home, go to the training room, or visit other rooms to get props to bring the lesson to life for the babies. Stela’s encouragement to bring the lesson to life paired with her stories regarding volunteering at the summer camp demonstrate the importance and effect of how she constructed herself as a professional. In addition, Stela’s opportunity to reflect demonstrates importance of intentionally asking individuals to reflect on their own experiences as a source for connections to what they already know and what they are being asked to do.

When Layken was asked to reflect on personal experiences that impacted the way see views herself professionally she shared her experiences of volunteering in a church setting. She sees her volunteering gave the opportunity to grow and develop with other youth in her church because she was young, not much older than some of the kids she worked with. As she thinks in terms of her volunteering and who she is and what she does professionally her experience was a bit different than the other CYPAs. Other CYPAs like Stela, Ro, and Mary talked about their volunteering experiences in positive manners. They talked about these experiences as positive contributors to the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals as well as
what they do as early childhood professionals. Layken also spoke of volunteering, however she did not share the same sentiment as Mary, Ro, and Stela.

Layken: So other than that just working with the kids in church. That was pretty much all the experience I had. It prepared me just because even though I was still young myself, I still got to learn and grow and just like be aware and work with kids in the church, I learned how to like I guess organize and manage kids a little. Honestly though, I really feel like as soon as I started work at the CDC it’s like I blossomed. So for me working at the CDC made me better in my volunteering. So ok so at first I would teach a class, but not really. I was more just reading and pointing at pictures. I’d be “teaching” Noah’s Arc but I didn’t know how to break it down to the kids’ levels. I really just reading it, nothing else.

As Layken reflected on her personal experience of volunteering at church, she, like Ro, Stela, and Mary, stated that the experience of volunteering impacted how she professionally constructed herself as an early child educator. Layken talked about she considered volunteering at church to be beneficial in a broad sense. She explained that it was positive in that she had the chance to be around, learn, and work with children of the church. Layken initially spoke and described volunteering at the church in terms of it was an opportunity taking into consideration her age. She appeared hesitant and quite nonchalant about saying that while volunteering she learned about monitoring and organizing children. Layken excitedly confirmed that church did have an impact on her as an early childhood educator and then she stated in prepared her because she was young it was a way for her to learn in general grow with the children while learning to manage and organize children. Layken spoke of situated learning. Through her interaction and
being placed in a situation to work with children directly she was able to learn about, managing, organizing and managing children. Layken’s reference to age signified a belief that her age automatically positioned her at the out perimeters of legitimate peripheral participation. She constructed herself in terms and association to age. She rationalized that being a younger age meant that she did not have the same experiences as someone that may be older. Whereas other CYPAs talked about the way their volunteering impacted them as CYPAs Layken offered a contrast. She spoke about her practices initially and then how being a CYPAs made the impact on her as a volunteer. Layken stated she felt that volunteering at church was impactful. What was interesting was that during this conversation Layken verbalized her realization that she denoted a change in her experience with volunteering at the church due to beginning to work at the CDC. Layken described her volunteering at church as it had “blossomed” once she began working at the CDC. She referred to her initially teaching lessons at church prior to working at the CDC as just going through the motions of reading books or lesson. Although Ro, Mary, Stela, and now Layken talked about the impact of volunteering, Layken differed from the rest of the participants. Layken was the youngest participant and had worked in military CDCs the shortest amount time. Layken’s interview went in two directions compared to the other CYPAs that mentioned volunteerism. Layken, like the others, reflected on and talked briefly about one form of preparation (organizing and managing children) she felt she received from volunteering. She then changed courses in her reflection and began talking about how she realized that she did some things in a way prior to working at the CDC that improved once she began working at the CDC.

Ro, Stela, Mary, and Layken each recalled personal experiences that involved volunteering that affected who they are professionally and what they do as professional in the
field of early childhood education. Although their experiences were different, what tied each of them together was a common theme of them of situated learning. As each of them shared stories of volunteering, they all talked about how these experiences allowed them to be engaged and actively participate in activities that were real, relevant, and situated. The activities they described occurred through relationships, between the interactions of people, their prior knowledge, and with authentic, informal, contextual learning. It was this learning that served as a major contributing factor in how these CYPAs constructed themselves as professionals in the figured world of early childhood professionals.

Babysitting, being a part of a family, and volunteering, all were themes that emerged as participants shared their personal experiences that they identified as having an impact on the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals. Both Ro and Stela explained that their volunteering experiences were a result of having young children and wanting to be involved in their early education. Ro and Stela compared what they currently did as early childhood professionals and the positive learning experiences of being volunteers they can now really see that those were really valuable and important times because there was quite a bit of overlap and preparation for work they currently do as CYPAs. Layken on the other hand, when asked about personal learning experiences that impacted her professional identity, talked about her experiences of volunteering in church at an early age. Layken shared and explained that as she reflects on those experiences it was good for her because it was a learning opportunity and it also gave her chance grow with other children in the church. While Ro and Stela both acknowledged that volunteering played a major role in how they define what it means and looks like to be an early childhood professional, Layken saw it mainly as a space for her own early learning about the process of growth and development in young children. Although their experiences were
slightly different, Layken, Ro, and Stela all talk about these experiences as opportunities for learning that is connected to ways they think about what it is they do, as well as how they approach tasks associated with who they are now as CYPAs and early childhood professionals.

**Discussion**

As CYPA reflected on their personal experiences that played a part in the construction of their professional identities they provided insight and illustrations demonstrating learning as social, learning in communities as practice, the mapping of figured worlds within the CDC, and apprenticeship. They had social personal learning experiences that lead to them acquiring skills that they needed to be CYPA professionals. The findings in this chapter serve as tools and resources that aid in the “re-conceiving” of learning, learners, and education in regards to social practice. These findings provided a basis of an argument that posits that it was through what were the normal, everyday, lived, experiences in the personal lives of the participants that learning was “ubiquitous” in ongoing activities, though often unrecognized as such (Lave, 1993, p. 5). This stands in contradiction the point that often times when learning and education is discussed it is typically based on the assumption that learning occurs individually in a classroom setting, and has a definite beginning and end, that is decontextualized from the daily activities of individuals, and that it occurs in response to direct instruction/teaching (Wenger, 1998 p. 3). The stories CYPAs shared create the need for discussion regarding the connections between themes that emerged in this chapter from their personal experiences and theory. Specifically, as CYPAs talked about their overall pasts and to shared important experiences that impacted how they saw themselves and constructed their identities as early childhood professional participants they provided insight about the ways in which the themes of babysitting, being a part of large
families, serving as parent volunteers, being a mother, and losing a child were connected to theories of social learning, Figured Worlds, Communities of Practice, and situated learning.

As CYPA talked about their personal experiences that impacted the construction of their professional identities they spoke about acquiring skills. CYPAs drew on their personal experiences of babysitting, being a part of large families, volunteering, taking care of their own children and one even talked about how the loss of her child were real life experiences that taught them lessons that prepared them to do the work they do as CYPAs. In all of these instances CYPAs talked about how the skills they acquired occurred among other people in a variety of contexts and in relation to particular cultures. When CYPAs were asked about personal experiences they never mentioned that their knowledge was something they obtained as individual or in a classroom or formal education setting. As they talked about important past experiences that helped them learn to be and become who they are as early childhood professionals they referenced personal experiences that served as resources and tools in learning and being prepared for the work they do as CYPAs.

As CYPAs talked specifically about the lessons they learned that prepared them for being early childhood professional they spoke about learning while they were actively involved and participating. They were learning while in the midst of actively engaging in activities such as babysitting, volunteering, fulfilling family responsibilities and roles and parenting. CYPAs construct who they are as early childhood professional partially from the experiences they had in their personal lives. CYPAs illustrate that their learning was situated in a variety of personal experiences and it was through these situations they were able to create meaning from these activities of their everyday lives and learn in a social but informal setting. This is suggestive in that learning can happen by way of social relationships and they use these experiences as prior
knowledge and make connections to new contexts such as the CDC to help them as they construct the professional identities. As the CYPAs reflected they also talked about experiences where they talked about being learning through “apprenticeships”. Their stories were about their learning skills from a variety of more skilled individuals they considered experts when it came to providing knowledge and skills related to educating and caring for children. An important part of situated learning CYPAs discussed was the component of practice of learning through apprenticeship. In addition to talking about how situated learning served as means for them actively engaging in activities and acquiring skills that they would saw as important for constructing their professional identities as early childhood professionals they also told stories of how they saw themselves being prepared and constructed as early childhood professionals through the learning practice of apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship makes obvious the social nature of learning and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in this unique setting often CYPAs do not have possessed formal post-secondary educations. Then the question is how is it that CYPAs know how to or learned how to be early childhood professional? As CYPAS shared their own personal experiences in regards to being impacted in the construction of their professional identities they made explicit connections between who they are and what they do as CYPAs to what they learned to do from their past personal experiences. When asked about being prepared for the work they currently do again CYPAs talked about specific instances of babysitting, taking on various roles and responsibilities as members of large families, being a parent, and serving as parent volunteers as explanation for how they knew how to be and act as CYPAs. They told stories and emphasized the importance of having opportunities that allowed them to work and develop relationships with others that allowed them to work alongside and learn about various aspects regarding how to care and
educate young children. It can be seen that as CYPAs shared stories of working with others with varying levels of experiences and expertise what emerged mimicked apprenticeship. As CYPAs talked about the ways in which they came to learn and be knowledgeable about providing care and education for young children, it could be seen that the process they talked about referred to learning that occurred in a domain that allowed them to acquire, develop, and use them for specific tasks such as caring for young children in a variety of situations and settings. However, what we see is the CYPAs ability to recognize and make explicit that they each have a set of past personal experiences that unbeknownst to them then, but now they see served as times for learning a set of skills, acquiring tools, and resources; that contributed to the towards the mastery of their craft of childcare. Alongside as well as under the guise of others who were in some cases and in other cases more experienced than they were. As they talked about learning from others they referred to modeling and coaching scaffolding, three of many teaching methods used as means for assisting learners attain cognitive and metacognitive strategies for actually using managing and the discovery of knowledge (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) as it related to their own skill development as childcare providers and educators.

As CYPAs also talked about experiences that prepared them for the work they do as early childhood professionals, several participants spoke about how their personal experiences with their own families it can be seen how these personal experiences were then mapped onto the CDC, CYPAs workplace. People “‘figure’” who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds. As CYPAs talked about their personal learning experiences they also revealed a myriad of identities (i.e. babysitters, siblings, parents, parent volunteers) that were referenced as they constructed their
professional identities in the early childhood professional figured world. As they shared we could see how CYPAS came too conceptually (cognitively) and materially/procedurally produce (perform) their new self-understandings (identities) (Holland et. al, 1998). CYPAs spoke about their participation and engagement with learning in a sociocultural manner but they also illustrated how they then were able to move past possessing static identities in one situation and use the knowledge gained from that same instance to then using innovation and improvisation to map those ideas and practices on to another place. In CYPAs case they were able to not only take lessons and skills learned as babysitters and volunteers but they were also able to transpose the nature of relationships and interactions from one context to another as tools and resources for constructing their professional identities. We heard participants talk about interactions and relationships with their own families and how they were able to then engage in activities and processes that extended the same types of relationship and interaction to the children and parents they cared for while constructing their identities as early childhood professionals.

As CYPAs shared personal experiences with volunteering they spoke of the impact of being able to learn as a group that shared a common interest in working towards wanting to be knowledgeable and better for their children as parent volunteers. As CYPAs talked about their experiences with volunteering they were explicit in describing their domain, community, and practice. Their domain of knowledge was as their children while their community was they were all parents that wanted to be involved with their children’s education through volunteerism, and their practice was before, during, or after volunteering they used a variety of methods to share their experiences as ways to improve and better their children’s educational experiences. As CYPAs talked about their experiences with volunteering they also talked about the values of being members of communities of practice. As CYPAS talked about the richness and positive in
their community they also talked about what they got of the work they did. The following are some of the values of the communities of practice CYPAs gained: personal development, knowledge sharing, engaging in meaningful work, access to experts and their expertise, and construction of professional identities. CYPAs also benefitted by gaining social capital by being members of communities of practice (Bourdieu 1991). As they shared stories they talked about what they gained individuals as well as what the group gained and benefitted when they actively participated in the parent volunteering community. These relationships that were established in their communities of practice as well as while they engaged in sharing experiences, learning from each other, and participating in the group helped the CYPAs obtain social capital.

The findings in this chapter illustrate the complexity of what is meant by identities as well as the intricate parts and details that go into the way in which one constructs their identities. In this case, as CYPAs talked about their personal learning experiences that impacted the construction of the professional identities we saw that drew from a wide array of their own histories individually and collectively to make sense and construct who they are as professionals. Their professional identities were not limited to training and learning they got in a classroom or simply on the job, rather these findings illustrate the importance in lessons they learned, relationships they had built, and skills they had acquired in situated informal contexts before they ever considered being CYPA early childhood professionals. As they talked about personal learning the conversations were not focused or connected to instances that resembled formal schooling and traditional learning. The learning experiences they deemed as impactful for the construction of their professional identities were rooted in situated learning, communities of practices, apprenticeship, and the ability to activate prior obtained knowledge from one world and employ it in another and all occurred within the context of figured worlds. CYPAs
constructed who they were as professionals in connection to and based on what they knew how
to do. They talk about who they were as professionals in terms of the activities, situations, and
lessons learned from their pasts as tools and resources for being identified as a CYPA early
childhood professional.

In the next chapter I will explore the professional learning experiences of CYPAs and the
impact those experiences have had regarding the construction of their professional identities.
Chapter 5: CYPAs’ Professional Learning Experiences

This study examined how CYPAs on a military installation constructed their professional identities as early childhood professionals. From a sociocultural perspective on identities, I wanted to explore specifically the personal and professional learning experiences that have impacted the constructions of CYPAs’ professional identities as early childhood professionals. In the previous chapter I focused on and presented personal learning experiences that impacted the construction of CYPAs’ professional identities. In this chapter, I focus on and present the CYPAs’ professional learning experiences that impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

Identity is culturally and socially created and varied, encompassing a “unique blend of personal beliefs, dispositions, practical knowledge, and theories of teaching mediated by an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences” (Assaf, 2008, p. 240). Learning and identity are strongly related. Learning is seen as a process of becoming (Wenger, 1998); likewise, identity is a process in the act of self-making (Holland et al., 1998; McCarthey and Moje, 2002, Urrieta, 2007). According to sociocultural theory, both identity and learning are created in practice via activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As individuals participate in activities in a specific context, they engage in work and processes of learning and identity within what has been called “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998; McCarthey and Moje, 2002, Urrieta, 2007).

In this chapter, as CYPAs shared their professional experiences, learning emerged as a recurring theme in connection to the construction of their professional identities as early childhood professionals. There has been and still remains an assumption that learning happens as a result of an individual engaging in a lone process that has a definite beginning and end and that it is a direct result of teaching (Wenger, 1998). As CYPAs used their own voices to share their professional learning experiences, what was revealed were counter-narratives that favored the
notion of learning occurring on a continuum. On this continuum, formal degree learning occupied one end, while informal social learning occupied the other end. This continuum challenged traditional two major and more traditional views of learning. First, this continuum of views presented by the participants challenged the idea that learning was regarded as an individual process that only occurred in designated institutionalized spaces and contexts. Secondly, it also challenged the positioning of formal and informal learning as dichotomized. As a means for exploring these counter-narratives, I used the concepts of figured worlds, communities of practice, and situated learning theories to understand, make sense, and analyze CYPA’s personal experiences in connection to their professional identity construction. I used the concept of figured worlds to understand the social context of CYPA’s learning as they worked as early childhood professional on a military installations CDC. Figured worlds was understood as the space or “figured world” that where CYPAs learning was social and situated. To explore the learning CYPA spoke about, I drew on two social learning theories, communities of practice and situated learning, as tools that aided in exploring and drawing attention to what was said about the engagement, participation, and co-construction in actual contexts aspects of learning. Communities of practice are where groups of people share a concern or passion for something they do and they work together to learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2012). Communities of practice is a process of social learning that transpires when people with a shared interest in a subject or area work together, sharing ideas, techniques, strategies, solutions and building relationships. Wenger (1998, 2008) describes communities of practice as being “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor, members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they have learned through their shared and collaborative participation in these activities” (Wenger, 1998,
2008). Wenger went as far as to simplify the term by characterizing communities of practices as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (2008 p. 1). Lave (1988) describes situated learning as being fixed within activity, context, and culture, more specifically it needs to be presented within authentic contexts, those being settings and situations that require and typically involve specific knowledge. Lave and Wenger (1991) later position situated learning as a form of learning which occurs in a community of practice. They argue that learning is more than a simple transfer of decontextualized knowledge from one person to another, but it is a social process where knowledge is co-constructed and situated in particular contexts and embedded within specific social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice provided a lens for understanding that as CYPAs talked about their own professional learning experiences, they highlighted a social process of learning as well as advocated for the recognition of informal learning such as engaging in shared activities, sharing information, interacting, and assisting each other as legitimate approaches to knowledge and learning. Additionally, situated learning was used to focus on the connection and relationship between the actual learning and the social situation where it occurred. The use of situated learning also illustrated that learning was achieved as a result of having particular kinds of social engagements that occurred in particular contexts.

The analysis of participants’ voices as they shared their professional experiences was important for insight and understanding about the impact and relationship between learning and the construction of CYPA identities as early childhood professionals. The way in which the CYPAs talked about learning offers consideration for rethinking these oppositional forces of learning and embrace the reconceptualization of learning as a continuum. CYPAs talked about
learning in terms of the following 1. Formal degree learning, 2. Formal professional development learning, and 3. Informal learning.

In this chapter I will define each of the following terms: formal degree learning, formal professional development learning, and informal learning. After each term has been defined, I will present data and provide analysis regarding CYPAs’ perspectives and beliefs about each of the learning approaches. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion about CYPAs’ perspectives about the discussed learning approaches.

**Formal Degree Learning**

As CYPAs shared stories about their professional experiences they talked various forms of learning. CYPAs talked about learning that was more formal and lead to the obtaining of a degree, they talked about learning that occurred in more formal and structured spaces such as in professional development and trainings, and they also talked about learning that occurred in more natural and unintentional ways. In this first section I will define and address CYPAs perspectives and beliefs about formal degree learning.

**Defining Formal Degree Learning**

Formal degree learning is defined and associated with learning that is most often delivered or presented by a trained teacher(s) in a systematic intentional manner within an institution such as a school, college, or university setting and leads to some form of recognized diploma, qualification, certification, or credential (Commissions of European Communities, 2000; UNESCO, 2012).

As CYPAs spent time recollecting and reminiscing about a number of professional experiences that impacted how they constructed their identities as early childhood professionals, formal degree learning was a recurring theme that emerged. These stories oftentimes contained instances of them sharing their perspectives regarding various approaches to learning how to do
work associated with being CYPAs. As CYPAs used their voices to express these perspectives, they were passionate, explicit, and creative about their views on the value and appropriateness of different approaches to learning in specific contexts as opposed to these approaches existing in opposition to one another.

**Perspectives on Formal Degree Learning**

As CYPAs engaged in focus groups, interviews, and informal chats, what surfaced were explicit and passionate conversations regarding CYPAs’ beliefs and conceptualizations of learning as it pertained to being early childhood professionals working at a CDC on a military installation. Each of the nine CYPAs that participated in the study were all in agreement that they had been given an overall impression that whenever individuals that had a degree were coming to work at the CDC for the first time, those individuals were automatically positioned as more qualified and prepared than the CYPAs that were experienced and did not possess a degree(s). The participants shared that their impression was a result of direct and indirect comments and actions of the “higher ups” (mentors, facility administrators, and CYS program coordinators).

CYPAs interviews illustrated the explicitness and passion with which they spoke regarding their beliefs with respect to formal degree learning and its effect in terms of being CYPAs and becoming early childhood professionals.

Nicla, a staff that worked with children in the before- and after-school program, was one of the first CYPAs to bring up and share her professional experiences and views about formal degree learning as it pertained to the work they did as early childhood professionals.

Nicla: My take on that is, a degree is good to have. What I would say is I don’t disagree with no one having a degree. I do think though that sometimes experience outweighs a degree. OK, you can have a Master’s degree coming
fresh out of college, and you’re coming into the school system or you’re coming into CYS, but I’ve been there 10 years, and I’ve got more experience in what I’m doing the job for degree which you have. You’re coming in, yes you have the degree, but you’ve got to come in and I’ve got to train you because there are things that that degree didn’t teach you that need to be done at CYS. Sometimes I feel like the degree is good, yes, but experience outweighs degree a lot of times. It doesn’t make me feel good or valued. I’m OK, it is just that I have trained people with Master’s and Bachelor’s degree and all that. They’re coming in, yes, they have the knowledge of what they went to school for, but they don’t have it for what we’re doing at CYS. With you coming in, “Oh, I got a Bachelor’s, I got a Master’s”. It doesn’t bother me, but right now, your Bachelor’s or your Master’s, put it aside right now, I need to train you how to do this right here. We’re here to care for these children and we got to do it in the correct way.

Here Nicla expressed her belief regarding formal degree learning and learning through experiences. Nicla expressed her belief that having a degree is an accomplishment and has some value; however, in some cases such as being a CYPA having a degree or degrees is not enough. As we talked I made note that Nicla’s disposition was initially hesitant and apprehensive, she would pause, start and stop, and at one time said, “I hope I don’t offend you.” She cautiously stated her opinion, the way she approached the conversation illustrated her insight regarding seeing the value of possessing formal degree learning, but her own professional learning experiences had also provided her with the insight to value the learning that came with experience. Nicla’s comments also highlighted the point that in particular settings and contexts,
such as the CDC, formal degree learning isn’t enough because “there are things that degree didn’t teach you that need to be done at CYS”. In the context of the CDC, she positioned learning that happened from experience as more important or “outweighs” the learning that lead to a degree. She shared her perspective that for the specific type of work they did as early childhood professionals a degree alone was not enough. She added weight to her argument for learning through experience as opposed to formal degree learning by referencing her own professional experiences where she has had instances of individuals’ possessing various degrees coming to the CDC to work and she had to be the one to train them. She initially displayed her awareness and frustration with instances where she had been in a position because of her experience as an “old timer” to train the “newcomers”. She acknowledged that she initially felt devalued as she thought about times when the “higher ups” would elevate the new staff with degrees or in other cases when the new staff themselves would come in with perspectives of superiority. As Nicla continued, her disposition shifted from devalued to empowered as she talked about training new staff that had degrees. Her disposition changed because she acknowledged and highlighted her awareness that the knowledge she possessed as a result of being situated in the context she worked, and being able to engage in learning other than formal degree learning, was what positioned her as more knowledgeable because she was already familiar with norms and practices that were a part of and associated with being an early childhood professional at a CDC on a military installation. Her knowledge became a tool of agency to position herself as one that is in possession of authority and power because she has the knowledge of how to exist and come to be in that particular context that came from being able to learn skills which was what the “newcomer” or new staff needed. As she stated “but right now, your Bachelor’s or your Master’s, put it aside right now, I need to train you how to do this right
here.” Nicla illustrated that she acknowledged the newcomers’ formal degree learning, but in the same breath she was explicit about there being a change from formal degree learning to a more apprenticeship and situated model of learning the newcomer would encounter as she referenced “training” within the specific context of the CDC. Nicla’s comments regarding her perspective of formal degree learning compared to learning occurring as a result of experience, not only pointed to the reproduction and support of traditional views of learning that posit that learning is abstract and out of context (Stein, 1998), but they also illustrated her perception that there existed a valuing of formal degree learning over other approaches to learning. While Nicla’s comments were in alignment with traditional views of learning, on the other hand, her perspective and professional experiences also served as an illustration of an alternate approach to learning that provided relevant justification for the adoption of different perspectives regarding approaches to learning. Nicla’s professional experience encourage the adoption of approaches to learning that are social and situated in the specific context of the CDC.

Like Nicla, Isela, a CYPA who worked with toddlers, shared her perspective about the value and legitimacy of formal degree learning compared to learning through experience in the CDC context. As Isela began sharing her perspective regarding formal degree learning in comparison to CDC experience, she opened by admitting that while she did not have a degree, she did possess experience. As we talked, she told me that she thought it was important for people to understand that possessing a degree was good, however because of her first-hand experiences working with CYPAs that came to the CDC with a degree, she quickly found out that their degrees did not prepare them for the work they would do as CYPAs at the CDC at the military installation. She shared a professional experience of working with someone with a degree but who she perceived as not having the skills needed to work in the CDC.
Isela: Sometimes it's good. I don't have the degree, but I have the experience. People have degrees and don't know what do with it when they get here. It is important for people to understand that. One time, we had a girl who had degrees in everything, but she didn't know what she was doing. I understand you may have school but that is not enough for this. You have to get in here and learn work with people who are professionals and have been doing this. You can't just come in here just because you have this paper think you are it. Doing it right there in the class with others and then learning from the training helps. I know because I never went to college. Even when I had my own center, with the little workshops I learned so much and it was exactly what was needed.

Isela comments highlighted and emphasized her perspective that positioned learning acquired from experience over formal degree learning. As she shared her recollection and experience with the “girl who had degrees in everything”, she first pointed out that her degree that came from her formal degree learning was decontextualized and “not enough for this”. Isela, like Nicla, acknowledged the degrees but also homed in on the girl’s perceived inability to know what she was doing. She expressed her frustration with the assumptions and perspectives that degrees served as artifacts and markers signifying automatic entrance and membership into the figured world of early childhood professionals. Isela offered solutions to issues such as those where new staff came to the CDC with degrees but lacked context-specific skills, practices, and knowledge. She first advocated for “doing it right here in the class”. Isela’s comment referred to her promoting the engagement of learning that is situated in the context of the CDC. Isela’s interview demonstrated her perspective regarding that a degree or as she referred to it, “this
paper,” does not automatically entitle anyone to be identified or to construct themselves as an early childhood professional. What Isela talked about could be viewed from a communities of practice perspective as engaging in learning that encourages apprenticeship and communities of practice by working with a more experienced veteran professional and situatedness by working in context where one begins participating at the perimeter and through legitimate peripheral participation progresses towards becoming and an through full participation are major contributing factors that aid in the construction identities as early childhood professionals.

Stela, an infant staff CYPA, also shared professional experiences that involved talk about learning and identity. After completing one of many informal observations, I asked Stela about why one of the staff was writing names on pieces of masking tape and attaching them on the paper towel dispenser above the diaper changing station. Little did I know a question about masking tape would lead to insight about Stela’s perspective about learning and the construction of her identity as an early childhood professional:

Stela: Yes, that's her job. Sometimes, she's not able to do it because we get so busy with the babies. That's one of the responsibilities that we give her, and she's been keeping it. Also, we have Ms. Sommer who is also new. We're teaching her everything because she has her Bachelors, she's been in the school district. So, she never went with the babies like we do here, but she's good. She is learning what we are doing, she is right there trying what we do. This is a day-to-day learning process, we learn when we work and do it.

As Stela told me about Ms. Sommer, a new staff in her room, she first referred to her degree and that she worked in a local school district. This was a set-up or preparation for Stela to switch gears and making a distinction between the work done in the context of the CDC as compared to
the work done in the context of the local school district. The bachelor’s degree was an artifact for entering and being identified as a member of the figured world associated with being a teacher, but that was not the case in the figured world of the early childhood professional. When Stela said “So, she never went with the babies like we do here,” she denotes that there is contrast in how things are done in different contexts. Due to there being a different way of doing and being in various contexts, some form of learning is then needed in order to transmit required knowledge for specific practice in specific contexts. The learning that Stela spoke about was social, engaging, at times explicit, and situated. In this case, with her use of “we,” Stela implicitly positioned herself as a member of the figured world of early childhood professionals while holding Sommer on the outskirts of the figured world with possible entrance dependent upon her learning. Stela also positioned herself as a “master” when she talked about Sommer’s learning from an apprenticeship perspective. Through informal observations I was able to see Stela make the “process of work” (Collins, Holum, & Brown, 1991) visible as she modeled, scaffolded, and coached Sommer through a number of practices and skills needed to be a part of the figured world of the early childhood professional at the CDC. Learning through apprenticeship was also visible as I watched and talked informally to Sommer as she observed and learned what other CYPAs were doing as she was positioned alongside them. I also have notes from informal observations of where Sommer often engaged in practices such as diaper changing, parent-conferences, and application of basic care items under the supervision of the “expert”, Stela. Stela’s perspective about formal degree learning was not as explicit as Nicla and Isela’s; however, she, like them, still spoke about the importance of coming to know how to do the work of early childhood professionals through various social learning experiences and opportunities.
Layken, the youngest of my participants, held a perspective regarding formal degree learning that was aligned more with current trends geared towards a push for all early childhood care providers and educators to be professionalized by obtaining degrees through formal degree learning. While Layken may have been in alignment with current trends, she was misaligned with the perspectives of the other CYPAs in the study. After having an informal conversation with Layken about how school was going for me she opened up and shared her perspective about formal degree learning and professionalism.

Layken: School is important. I loved going to school. When I was in high school I didn’t care, nobody pushed me. So I was a straight C student. In college I got a 4.0. So I said I definitely want to push to be the best that I can be, and I feel the more educated I am the better I can do my job be more professional and in turn be better prepared to help the children, the better I can help their families. That’s why I want to go back to school because I think it does help a lot.

As Layken talked about her professional learning experiences, she compared her experience with secondary schooling to her post-secondary experiences as a basis for her perspective that supported formal degree learning. As Layken talked about her post-secondary experience she spoke about having a “4.0” and associated her grade point average with being more educated, being better at her job, more professional and better able to help the children and families she serves as a CYPA. Layken’s comments here are contradictory to what she stated at the beginning of our first focus group. During our session all participants individually spoke about the way in which the “higher ups” seemed to favor and lead them to believe that the new staff who had degrees were more qualified, prepared, and professional than those who did not. Layken individually said she felt the same way as her colleagues and had experienced the same
things as the other CYPAs in the study. While conducting informal observations and taking part in many informal conversations with Layken, I took note of her fascination with my educational and professional experiences and journey. I noticed her many and passionate conversations about being determined to complete her bachelor’s degree and go on to get a master’s degree. Layken often swapped positions from being an expert and supervisor for new staff, while at other times she was also an apprentice as she worked alongside other CYPAs such as Nicla, Ro, Stela, Mary, and Isela, that were more experienced and skilled. Although Layken is explicit about her perspective regarding how important it is to her to go to school as means for being better and more educated and professional, what is missing is her voice and explicitness regarding the value, if any, she placed on learning she provided as well as all the learning she received.

All CYPAs with the exception on one, Layken, spoke about formal degree learning being important, they spoke highly about it, they admitted that it was important and they were careful not to take away from its value, but they were also explicit and adamant about saying that the degree itself was not enough to be considered a CYPA early childhood professional. While Layken initially agreed with the other participants about being faced with assumptions that positioned formal degree learning in a more positive light than other approaches to learning she later in her individual interview acted as counter case as she spoke about formal degree learning as her means for being more educated, professional, and overall better prepared for serving the children and families she worked with.

In addition to CYPAs’ sharing their thoughts and perspectives regarding formal degree learning as they shared stories of their professional experiences and its impacts on the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals, CYPAs also talked about their professional experiences with formal professional development learning.
Formal Professional Development Learning

Researchers have examined teacher professional development from various perspectives. Lawless and Pellegrino (2007) provided a systematic evaluation plan for teacher professional development activities for integrating technology into teaching and learning. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Yoon (2001) compared the effects of characteristics in professional development on teachers’ learning, and identified three major features that significantly improved teachers’ self-identified increases in knowledge and skills in their classroom practice: (a) focus on content knowledge; (b) opportunities for active learning; and (c) coherence with other learning activities. Hunzicker (2011) offers a checklist that includes the following and explains that it serves as a guide for creating and implementing professional development that is more meaningful than “one shot, sit and get presentation-style workshops (p. 176). In general, research states that when effectively carried out, formal professional development has been shown to produce positive teacher and student outcomes (Garet et al, 2001; Hunzicker, 2011; Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007; Martin et al, 2010).

In this study, as CYPAs shared stories about their professional experiences, they talked about their own learning as well as a variety of approaches to learning. In this section I will define and present CYPAs’ stories and conversation about their experiences with formal professional development learning. As CYPAs used their own voices to talk about their experiences what surfaced were their perspectives and beliefs about formal professional development learning and its impact on the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

Defining Formal Professional Development Learning

In education the term “professional development” can be used in reference and to describe a broad and wide variety of specialized trainings. In this study the term formal
professional development learning is defined and associated with learning that was structured and occurred in spaces that were physically located outside of the CDC classrooms. The professional development CYPAs spoke of in the study occurred in spaces such as the training room located within the CDC, at the local Education Service Center that provides core guidance and services for educational purposes, and at other military and local CDC’s, daycares, and early learning centers. The professional developments were sponsored and presented by individuals who were affiliated or were representatives from a variety of local and national organizations such as Child and Youth Services (CYS), The American Red Cross, The Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), Army Community Service (ACS), the local Army Medical Center and local chapters of The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). All of the professional developments possessed defined objectives, goals, and/or aims that were to be achieved by the conclusion of the session(s), and were presented using a variety of intentional and direct instructional techniques.

**Formal Professional Development Learning: Hands-On and Engaging**

As CYPAs engaged in focus groups, interviews, and informal chats with me, each of the nine participants shared explicit and passionate conversations regarding their beliefs and perspectives about formal professional development learning and its relation to being early childhood professionals working at a CDC on a military installation. What was common across five of the nine participants was their explicitness about how important it was for the formal professional development learning to have been hands-on and engaging in order to positively impact and contribute to the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals.

As Tee took time to share her experiences with trainings and professional development she shared that she thought there were just some good “things” that make some training sessions
better than others. After asking her to talk more about what specific “things” she was referring to, Tee expressed that experiences that include hands-on learning were important and impactful.

Tee: Hands-on because I have to be able to do it. I think it makes it better to be able to move around and it makes the learning better. We get the chance to practice doing whatever it is. We work in a place that has us do lots of different tasks, and those things change sometimes. It is better if we get a chance to actually do it during training so we understand and get it. It makes the learning better, you get it because you are doing it. It is active, you know not just sitting and watching but doing it for real.

As Tee talked about her professional experiences she explicitly identified and talked about being “hands-on” as one of the good “things” or qualities of positive formal professional development learning. She specifically talked about being able to be mobile as a positive impact that improved learning. She also talked about being able to engage and “practice” a variety of tasks that were directly related to the skills they were to be taking with them and expected to perform when they got back to their respective contexts, in this case, the figured world of early childhood professionals at the military CDC. Tee asserted that there was better learning that happened in formal professional development learning spaces when there were opportunities to engage in a “kind” of situated learning. “Kind” because what Tee mentions is the aspects of situated learning that are concerned with the active, engaging, learning that is related to practicing in tasks that are directly associated and or related to the work they do or expected to do as early childhood professionals, but in a decontextualized way. Tee did not focus on such a relationship, she emphasized the actual act of being able to get to practice a task. Tee described learning that was more in tuned with the notion of authentic learning that posits the idea of
“learning by doing” (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1987, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shor, 1987; Stein, 1998; Wenger, 1998). Tee’s perspective regarding formal professional development described and supported the notion that learning should have at the center the learner and be occur in a manner that allowed the learner to be fully engaged and get involved in an activity and through the process learn ow that activity works, how one feels about the activity, and what the activity enables one to do. In this case Tee talked about learning by doing as a way to gain skills and knowledge directly connected to skills and knowledge related to specific practices needed by CYPAs.

As Rachel reflected on some of her professional experiences with learning she talked about having the opportunity to attend professional development workshops and training sessions that were “real good” and some that we not so good. When asked about the differences she was between the good ones and the ones that could use some improvement she identified that a major difference was that her good experiences all involved hands-on approaches to whatever they were learning.

Rachel: The good ones had us always doing something, it was not us just sitting and looking at a paper or just listening to a presenter or trainer. No, no, no! We had to do something to learn something. We participated, we were active. The real good ones had us doing an activity or preparing an activity just like we really do in our rooms together. My favorite, Ms. Susan, is when you would have us on those Saturday trainings or training holidays and we went to our class to take our lesson plans and look over them to talk with each other about how we could change and improve them. Then you had us do it, right there, right then together all of us helped one another. You were not just
talking to us about what it needs to have, but we learned that by actually doing it together.

Rachel, like Tee, talked about the “good” ones as she referred to formal professional development learning experiences. Rachel pointed out that what made them “good” ones were that they were created opportunities for the participants to be active and engaged in the overall experience. She explained that they were doing more than just “looking at a paper or just listening to a presenter or trainer.” Here Rachel positioned and held formal professional development learning experiences that were engaging and active in a higher and more elevated status than those that did not. Although Tee was not clear in her mention on whether they, the participants, worked in the professional developments as individuals or with other early childhood practitioners, Rachel was explicit about working with other practitioners during these experiences. As Rachel talked about the “real good ones” and her favorite Saturday training she explained that what made them “real good” was the connection between able to engage in learning in a context that was social. In this instance, for Rachel what was enjoyable and impactful about the formal professional development learning she mentioned were the opportunities to be active and engaged but also the social nature of the learning that occurred in the sessions. As Rachel talked about lesson plan trainings she also highlighted the way they as early childhood practitioners and professionals engaged in the practice or evaluating, revising, and reflecting on their lessons plans as a community of practice. Rachel’s comments also spoke to the importance of social participation for them as CYPAs as well as being active participants in the practice of writing lesson plans that were artifacts that aided in the construction and identification of them as early childhood professionals in the figured word of early childhood professionals.
Nicla also talked about the importance of hands on and engaging formal professional
development and trainings that aided in the positive construction of identities of early childhood
professionals. Here Nicla shared a small group professional training experience where she
recalled her former trainers approach to learning.

Nicla: Her trainings were good because she knew I am hands-on. I got to see and I
got to practice, I just got to be able to do it. So she would get me and the
others all set-up at the computer. We all were different and but some of us had
had the same stuff we were working on. She would give me a little thing to
type, like a little note, or letter for my kids. Stuff I usually would take lots of
time doing handwritten because I didn’t know about the computer like that.
She went step one, step two, step three, you know and she said it a couple
times. The next step though is that she let us do it on our own, she would say
that we could talk and ask each other stuff, and then she checked what we did
until we got the feel of it. I felt good, better about the work I was doing.

Nicla’s recollection about her former trainer’s computer sessions to help her create a
computer generated “little note or letter” demonstrated her learning through apprenticeship and
situated learning approaches. Nicla asserted that her trainings were good because they were
hands on but what is described is an apprenticeship approach to learning where Nicla was able to
learn about the computer by working under the trainer, the computer “expert” or “supervisor” as
the computer “novice” to acquire computer skills that aided in doing early childhood
professional work in a more efficient way. As Nicla described her experience, she positioned the
trainer as the supervisor in the apprenticeship. The trainer fulfilled the supervisory role by
providing step by step guidance, monitoring, observing, scaffolding, and evaluating their work.
Nicla’s construction of her professional identity as an early childhood professional was also positively impacted as she learned computer skills by being situated in a formal professional development learning experience with other early childhood professionals with varying levels of computer skills as they used the computer to complete a variety of real tasks and activities associated with early childhood practices. The trainer created an environment that positioned Nicla and the other early childhood professionals to work on their computer skills not by irrelevant decontextualized tasks; rather, she provided them with tasks that immersed them in the experience with working and learning to use the computer in connection with activities that were situated as real and relevant for the work they did as early childhood professionals. Another key aspect of this experience mentioned by Nicla was the social component. She did not go into detail but did mention a social aspect to the training when she explained that it was a group of CYPAs at the training and that they “all were different”, she later clarified that she was referring to their varying computer skill and comfort levels. She also talked about a social participation and aspect that was encouraged by the trained when Nicla said “she would say that we could talk and ask each other stuff”. These mentions of working with others and their differing levels pointed to the social aspect that was present in this particular formal professional development learning experience. The training Nicla spoke of aided in the construction of her professional identity.

Bee and Nicla both in their individual interviews as well as in the focus groups talked negatively about the same formal professional development learning experience they were required to attend as a result of them writing more behavior reports than other CYPAS. The behavior reports were written in response to issues that were similar in nature. Both Bee and Nicla, expressed that the mandatory CYS behavior trainings were a “waste of time”.
Nicla: We did this training on behavior, right here and a lot of the things were, you know, some of the things were okay, but not really. The person that was teaching it, we were just sitting like, "Okay, what is she saying?" It’s like she was just reading off a paper, she didn’t relate it to what we do or the problems we have with behavior in the class. She wasn't teaching it right or to me it was like, okay, so what are you talking about? I needed more. It was a waste of my time, once a month on a Saturday, for about six months; like one Saturday in a month 8-12.

As Nicla spoke about her negative formal professional development experience, she shared her level of frustration by not only verbally expressing her frustration, but by also mimicking the presenter. During her personal interview and the focus group interview, Nicla stood up and demonstrated how the presenter stood in one spot, at the front of the training room, and was “just reading off a paper”. As a way to better understand this negative experience of formal professional development learning, I compared Nicla’s earlier comments about her computer session that she called a “good” formal professional development learning. As I looked at both experiences what differed was the way she described the “good” training positively because it was hands-on and allowed her to “practice and be able to do it” and in this experience, she described herself and the other participants engagement and social interaction to be as “just sitting like...she was just reading off a paper.” These comments illustrated the lack of engagement and overall social interaction. Nicla’s construction of her professional identity as an early childhood professional was stifled and stagnated because what should have been an opportunity to learn and improve one of her practices as an early childhood professional was viewed by her as a “waste of my time”. Nicla called attention to the disconnect and lack of
usefulness of the formal professional development learning experience due to the trainer not situating their learning in the specific and actual behavior issues and concerns with which they needed assistance. Bee also spoke negatively about the same behavior training, commenting about the lack of engagement, activity, and social interaction during the training.

Bee: One time they had this six-month ridiculous waste of time behavior training. It was a waste of time, all we did was sit there and listen. We did not get to talk about what they do in their classes or what we do in ours, what does work and what definitely doesn’t. It was a complete miss. When I say a waste of time, it was! We did not get to do anything. What about letting us talk to each other to see how other people deal with these kids. I feel like it makes me look crazy and like I don’t have no control over my class when I got these one or two kids with behavior issues. Usually, you hear go look at somebody else’s room to see what’s going on, go talk to another room that has had the kid and see what they did. No not this time, they gave us some stuck us with some mess.

Although Bee did not say as much as Nicla about the presenter of the training, she did echo that there was a lack of engagement and as well as a lack of opportunity for CYPAs to engage in any form of social participation with other practitioners during the training. From her comments Nicla wanted the encouragement and approval that it was okay to work together to share, reflect, and problem solve the behavior issues they were all were experiencing in their classrooms as a community of practice focused on improving not only their practices as professionals but their identities as well.
In addition to CYPAS formal degree learning, and formal professional development learning, they also talked about learning that was just as important and impactful but was unintentional, unstructured, and occurred in more natural and informal ways.

**Informal Learning**

In this study, as CYPAs shared stories about their professional experiences, they continued to talk about their own learning. In this section I will define and present CYPAs’ voices as they shared stories and conversations that revealed that another contributor of their knowledge and skill development that impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals was the result of them having the chance to engage in numerous informal learning opportunities. The CYPAs’ voices revealed that they are aware of various approaches to learning. What was key was that while they talked about seeing the value and respect the acquisition of degrees through formal degree learning, they also used their voices to express the importance of rethinking the notion that learning could only be approached through that avenue.

**Defining Informal Learning**

There are various ways to describe and define informal learning. McGivney (1999) used the following in her study to describe informal learning:

- Learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and arises from activities and interests of individuals and groups, and may not be identified recognized as learning.

- Non course-based learning activities (which might include discussions, talks, advice, and guidance) provided or facilitated in response to expressed interests and needs by people from a range of sectors and organizations (health, housing,
social services, employment services, education and training services, guidance services).

- Planned and structured learning such as short courses organized in response to identified interests and needs but delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings.

Additionally, the Commission of the European Communities (2000) and UNESCO (2012) define informal learning as the natural accompaniment to everyday life; while it may not necessarily be intentional learning and so may not be recognized even by individuals themselves as making contributions to the building of their own knowledge and skills. A final definition of informal learning states that it is learning which takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s performance of their job and/or their employability, and which is not formally organized into a program or curriculum by the employer, does not lead to obtaining any form of credentials, and that it may be recognized by the different parties involved, and may or may not be specifically encouraged (Dale & Bell, 1999; EU Commission, 2000; Tissot, 2008).

In this study, informal learning was the learning that happened or was produced as a result of CYPAs’ engaging in daily life activities which are related to the work they carried out as CYPAs at a CDC on a military installation. These informal learning experiences were not structured, in the sense that they did not possess learning objectives, specified learning times, and they did not aid in or lead to the acquisition of any kind of degree or certification. The informal learning was not intentional and it occurred naturally and spontaneous as a part of the everyday work CYPAs did as early childhood professionals.

Coffield (2000) posited that “informal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning; it
needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant to employment only form of learning and to legitimizing other forms of learning” (p.8). In this study, CYPAs’ conversations about their professional experiences echoed Coffield’s sentiments regarding the value of informal learning. Their conversations also revealed there had been instances that opportunities for impactful knowledge sharing, building, which aided in the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals that were often dismissed, overlooked and treated as meaningless.

The Importance of Informal Learning

As CYPAs reflected and shared their stories about professional experiences that impacted the construction of their professional identities, during interviews, informal conversations, and focus groups they talked about what they did as CYPAs. Participants provided day to day descriptions and spoke specifically about certain tasks and skills they had gained in order to carry out tasks they regularly did as part of their work as early childhood professionals at the CDC. This section presents patterns in CYPAs’ responses to being asked how they came to learn to perform certain tasks or acquired certain skills they talked about as they shared their professional experiences. The data below make explicit the importance of informal, socially-situated learning as contributing to the construction of the identities of these CYPAs as early childhood professionals.

As Mary talked about her day to day work, when I asked how she learned to do some of the activities I observed during informal class observations she shared she had learned by being able to work with individuals that may be more knowledgeable about certain practices, children, or classrooms. Here, Mary talked about being reassigned to work in another room with Catie, the CYPA that had been the lead in that particular classroom for over five years.
Mary: You learn when you are in the rooms with other people. You get to see and ask all types of questions or advice. I just go off what they are doing and saying and then I ask stuff. I take steps. I guess, first I would ask, in my case, Catie, because she is the lead in the room. If I wanted to learn and know something more about the kids and then I want to apply it. I would ask Catie first. I would say, “Catie, I want to learn _____ or _____ and I want to apply it in the room. What do you think?”

As Mary shared her experience of working in a new classroom, she initially answered that she didn’t know how she learned how to do tasks such as using flannel boards and puppets to read books; however, she then went on to explicitly share that it was through being able to work with others in other classrooms through observations as well as asking questions and seeking advice. Mary came to the realization that it was in opportunities for informal social learning such as learning by being able to be “in the rooms with other people” that served as the foundation for her knowing how to perform tasks and skills associated with the work she did at the CDC. Her learning occurred through informal conversations and questions as she engaged in various activities while in the classroom. Learning is key to identities (Wenger, 1998). The informal learning that she talked about was also a central to the construction of her professional identity as occurring through social participation. Mary acted as an active participant as she engaged in a variety of practices of the social community of CYPAs, and in the construction of her identity through their community. As she worked, asking and answering questions, reflecting on and sharing her experiences with other CYPAs, Mary along with the other CYPAs, were continuously engaged in constructing their shared identity as early childhood professionals by engaging in and contributing to their overall practices as early childhood professionals. It was
through informal conversations and observations that I was able to fully see Mary actively engaging in informal learning that also contributed to her own, as well as others’, knowledge acquisition, sharing, and building. These observations provided numerous opportunities for me to witness Mary engaging in various activities involving the children, and then later in the day having informal exchanges with other CYPAs regarding her interactions. One of the first mornings during my informal observations, I noted Mary sitting at the art table coloring and asking Sam, an older toddler to identify the colors of the crayons as they drew a picture. Late, during a diaper change, Mary asked Catie what she normally does to help Sam with his colors. Catie said that she usually just did it during art but she also started using the counting bears and blocks from the other areas. Mary responded by saying that she would try that with Sam and let her know how it goes. Another example of Mary actively engaging in informal learning occurred as we transitioned children from indoor to outdoor play. Mary asked me to keep an eye on the children as they put on their coats in preparation to go outside and play. While I watched the children, I noted Mary collecting books and putting them in red, yellow, and blue bins. After collecting the books she lined the children up and stood at the door with the bins of books. As I exited the classroom with the children, I noticed a staff from the adjoining room peeking out their door watching Mary. As I followed the children and Mary to the playground the staff watching Mary opened the door and asked, “How’d it go?” As Mary walked towards the staff I heard her say “It was good. You were right, the ones who are little shy, they take the books.” On another occasion, I arrived at 5:30 am to work with and observe Mary as she prepared her room as the opening room for the toddler area. During my observation, I noted that Mary took from her apron a miniature spiral notepad. She flipped through a few pages and then began going to individual shelves, picking out specific toys, and place them in different areas of the room. As
parents dropped their children off, I noticed Mary talk to the children at their eye-level asking them if they wanted to play. As the children said yes, she held their hands as they led her to the toy of their choice. That same day, Mena, another staff came to the class at 6:30 am. As Mena put on her apron and signed in on the classroom clipboard, I heard Mary tell Mena that Javier and some of the others did not spend as much time as usual at the dinosaurs and that they probably needed to rotate the toys in the room. When asked why she would say that, Mary explained that it had been her experience that when children choose to play with a toy for an extended amount of time, they carry it with them, and use it properly, they are usually still interested in it. Mena but beware because the moment the toy becomes a weapon, and or children no longer seem to care for it, that usually means they are bored and could use something new to hold their interest. Mary’s voice about her own learning as well as my informal observations and conversations with her provided insight into how through informal learning she and other CYPAs were members of communities of practice geared towards improving and developing their practice.

Stela also referred to the importance of informal learning as she talked about her professional experiences associated with her some of her day to day CYPA activities while being the lead in the infant room. In this excerpt, Stela was providing an explanation and example concerning my question regarding some children wearing colored bracelets while at the CDC.

Stela: The bracelets, yes, they know because I've been letting them know, especially because we work with so many from both rooms. Sometimes, we have had staff from the back room that comes to help us. You don’t know or think to tell someone until you know we are here doing it. Like if there's somebody new, while we do it we show them and let them know that they need to read
the bracelet, give him soy milk, put him away from everybody and watch out that he doesn't get the milk from somebody else. I tell them all the time, “We had to learn the hard way.” It’s just so funny even though they come from the back and have different ages they show us new ways to do it too. I guess we are all working and teaching and learning from each other.

Stela’s explanation about the handling of milk allergies served as more than just information about what she did as a CYPA; it also contained insight regarding the importance of informal learning in this particular context. Her comments aided in providing a clearer understanding that the professional learning that occurred in the classroom, while informal, was by no means random or insignificant. Rather, what Stela shared was as an illustration of how informal conversations, while seen as simple and insignificant, can be legitimate approaches to learning. The potentially life-saving and daily act of identifying a child with particular allergies are common practices and expectations that I was familiar with as a TACs, but Stela’s perspective provided insight about how CYPAs worked together to create and modify their own particular methods and systems for handling food allergies. Additionally, when asked what she meant by, “I tell them all the time, we had to learn the hard way.” Stela shared that a while back her and another staff that gave milk to a child who had a food allergy. This reference to a previous incident and her willingness to share her own experience with other CYPAs also served as a form of informal learning as a community. Stela used her own experience as a warning lesson for others. When Stela mentioned “they come from the back and have different ages they show us new ways to do it too” she pointed out that the interaction between staff from various age groups within the CDC also served as space and opportunities for more natural, unstructured learning. The learning Stela talked about was not organized or planned, and it did not contain
pre-determined objectives, goals, or aims. What Stela talked about was her own as well as others’ learning that occurred as part of their everyday work activities. She came to the realization that staff from other areas coming to work in her area also served as an opportunity for teaching and learning informally.

These informal observations and conversations with Stela emphasized that learning was still happening. While the learning was unplanned and informal, it proved to be just as important as formal degree or professional development learning. An example of this point would be Stela’s sharing of her own experience when a child’s health was put at risk. In this instance CYPAs were able to learn from one another as they worked towards improving their practices through their day to day interactions.

Ro, like Stela and Mary, was open and accommodating when asked how she learned to carry out some of the day to day practices and activities that I observed during informal observations and heard them talk about informally during our focus groups. In the excerpt below, Ro talked about learning to come up with various ideas and activities for working with the children in small and large groups. She explained that she liked working with other CYPAs but she still found that she often time had to work on her own to become a “researcher.”

Ro: I do like to work with others but you know I do have to do some researching of stuff myself. So I really become a researcher. I want to know about things or I want resources so I go and Google things. I’ll Google it or go and read up on it and then I go get another voice so I can like see, and like use other people that have worked with what I am looking at or may have more training than I do. I ask them stuff like, “what do you think about this?” So just, I can try to hear another insight to kind of match up or battle what they said and
what I said. I think that’s good because I learn new stuff and stay up on what’s going on in our profession and out there in world of early childhood.

Ro attempted to explain that she enjoyed learning and working with the “community” of CYPAs, but there were instances she needed to work alone or “do some researching of stuff myself.” As she talked about becoming a “researcher” her conversation initially was more focused on her own individual learning that seemingly served her sole purpose and only benefitted her when she referred to becoming a researcher when “I want to know about things or I want resources so I go and Google things.” Ro’s mention of google demonstrated that it was a tool that mediated her learning. It aided Ro as she sought to become more knowledgeable as a CYPA, and it assisted her as she moved into and through another layer of knowledge and understanding. Google acted as an artifact, and “intermediary tool” that aided in her research as she actively searched for resources and to “know about things”. Ro’s statement “then I go get another voice so I can like see, and like use other people that have worked with what I am looking at or may have more training than I do.”, was an example of the second level of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning. The major theme of Vygotsky’s theory is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky believed that all things are learned on two levels: 1. through interaction with others then integrated into their mental structure, and 2. the potential for cognitive development is limited to a “zone of proximal development” where the learner is cognitively prepared for exploration, but in order to fully develop, the learner needs help and social interaction (Briner, 1999). Here, Ro demonstrated that her learning occurred on the second level. She was prepared cognitively as she was able to use google for exploration, but in order for her to fully develop, Ro needed the interaction from other
CYPAs as they provided support by being “another voice” as she developed knowledge about various resources, and other information she needed.

While Ro’s learning was intentional, it was also informal because it lacked direct instruction, structure, it did not occur in an educational institution nor did it lead to any credentialing. Ro’s learning occurred as a result of her own individual effort in using the internet as a resource for locating information and searching for tools to use her class with young children. Although in this particular instance, the learning Ro shared was not formal degree or formal professional development learning, it still resembled the “traditional, individualized, decontextualized, definite start and end” (Wenger, 1998, p.3), type of learning that so often drives the notion of what is considered learning. Although this was Ro’s beginning position as she talked about having to be a lone “researcher,” there was a surprise shift in her quote when she stated, “and then I go get another voice so I can like see, and like use other people that have worked with what I am looking at or may have more training than I do.” This shift revealed that what was described was Ro’s personal informal learning experience that allowed her to have her own experience and gather knowledge that she could then bring back to the community so that they could collaborate and work towards improving their practice as early childhood professionals. The commentary from Ro provided an illustration of the learning and work engaged by the CYPAs in through their informal and regular day to day interactions. It was through Ro’s informal learning experience of researching then coming back to the “community” that positioned her as one of many active participants that facilitated the continuous fueling of the learning communities of practice via interacting with other CYPAs seeking advice. Ro also called attention to the importance of collaborating with other community members in the quest to be constructed as more knowledgeable about particular subject matters. A closer look also
revealed that Ro moved beyond just bringing information back to the community. She took what she learned during her online exploration and wanted to verify it with other CYPAS, including those that “may have more training” than her. Ro was critical about the information gathered from online, she chose to engage in a process of validation, which took place within the social context of the CDC. Here it can also be seen that Ro came to the realization that while there are many members of a community, there are may be various “degrees” (Wenger, 1998) of experience and participation among the community members. Ro acknowledged that as she explained that she had to “use other people that have worked with what I am looking at or may have more training than I do.” Ro recognized that there were various levels of participation. She was aware that at that time she operated in the periphery of the community, but looked to move in further. She also knew that learning through interacting and participating with more experienced CYPAs would increase her level of competence and be key in moving her from the periphery as a newcomer and closer to being considered more experienced. Ro’s final words served as an explanation and justification for her informal learning as an approach for improving her own practice as well as staying abreast of the changing world and practices. As Ro shared her this professional experience, she positioned herself as continuous learner and views herself as not only a member of the CDC community, but a part of a broader early childhood community of practice “out there in the world of early childhood”.

This section showed Mary, Stela, and Ro’s voices about their professional experiences, and demonstrated how social and informal learning lead to them constructing themselves as valuable, competent, and knowledgeable early childhood professionals

Discussion

As CYPAs reflected on their professional experiences that played a part in the construction of their professional identities they provided insight and illustrations demonstrating
learning as social, in communities of practice, as well as the mapping of figured worlds within the CDC and apprenticeship. They talked about socially-situated professional learning experiences that aided in the acquisition of particular skills CYPAs needed. Interviews, focus groups, informal observations and informal conversations also revealed socially-situated professional learning that lead to CYPAs’ gaining knowledge, which allowed them to carry out day-to-day tasks and practices associated with their work as early childhood professionals at the CDC. The findings in this chapter serve as evidence that contribute to the following:

1. “reimagining” what is meant by learning, 2. challenging traditional notions regarding a dichotomy of learning, and 3. making explicit implicit assumptions that impact what gets constructed as legitimate knowledge and what is dismissed as illegitimate. They also support the notion that learning is not only an act of social participation distinguished by components (i.e. community, identity, meaning, and practice) that are interrelated and integrated as part of the process of learning and knowing (Wegner, 1998), but that approaches to learning can exist on a continuum. As CYPAs shared their professional learning experiences what emerged this notion of a continuum emerged because the conversations illustrated learning as the coherent whole which was comprised of a collection of individual approaches (formal degree, formal professional development, and informal) that ranged from one extreme (formal degree learning) to another extreme (informal learning).

In chapter four, the CYPAs talked about their overall pasts and shared important experiences that impacted how they saw themselves and constructed their identities as early childhood professionals. They provided insights about the ways in which the themes of babysitting, being a part of large families, serving as parent volunteers, being a mother, and
losing a child were connected to theories of social learning, Figured Worlds, Communities of Practice, and situated learning.

In this chapter, the CYPAs shared stories about their professional experiences that aided in the support and demonstration of learning as a social process and the reconceptualization of learning as a continuum as opposed to treat it as a dichotomy. Specifically, CYPAs talked and shared their recollections of past professional experiences as they related to learning. As they shared, what emerged were their experiences and attitudes about formal degree learning, formal professional development learning, and informal learning as all impacting how they constructed their identities as early childhood professionals within socially-situated communities of practice.

As CYPAs shared their professional experiences that impacted the construction of their professional identities. What stood out was the way in which CYPAs talked about being constructed as early childhood professionals. As they talked about what was impactful they focused on learning in term of becoming professionals. They drew on past professional experiences connected to being a CYPA that emphasized the way in which as learning was a major contributor and factor in the construction of their professional identities. In all of these instances, CYPAs talked about the importance of the way learned as they were “becoming” and “figuring” how to be professionals. They were explicit in that they did respect and understand the value attached to formal degree learning but they were also adamant about their attitudes regarding the importance and need for learning that was situated in the context of the CDC, and that was social and happened amongst other people who shared their same passion and goals of improving their practice becoming better practitioners. Another important finding regarding CYPAs’ learning revealed that the way in which CYPAs talked about learning evoked the reimagining of learning not as a dichotomy but rather existing along a continuum where each
approach possessed its own characteristics but were still all acknowledged and viewed as legitimate approaches to learning.

Findings also solidified the existence of a communities of practice within the early childhood professional figured world. As CYPAs shared their experiences and attitudes regarding learning they identified the three required components of communities of practice: domain, community, and practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1998). They identified the domain as CYPA early childhood professionals at a military CDC. As they talked about the domain, they shared that it superseded a group or network of people or friends; rather, they spoke of a commitment to a shared passion in educating and caring for children. In talking about their community and its membership not only does there have to be a shared domain of interest but they also talked about their “shared competence” (Wenger, 2015); this “shared competence” is what the CYPA participants used as determining factor for distinguishing members of their community.

The second required component, community, was illustrated as participants talked about their learning as CYPAs. They shared numerous stories and instances of working with others. These served as examples that illustrated how CYPAs “engaged in joint activities and discussions, helping each other and sharing information,” hence building relationships that allowed them to learn from one another (Wenger, 2015).

Practice, the final required component, also showed up through interviews and conversations regarding the CYPAs’ professional experiences. Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998) assert that communities of practice develop members of the communities’ practice through a variety of methods. As revealed in the interviews and observations, the CYPAs used some of the
following methods to develop their practice: collective problem solving, collaborative
evaluation, working with others, observing others, asking, and sharing experiences.

Findings from this section of the study revealed that at this military installation CDC
there exists a figured world of CYPA early childhood professionals. The social context of
CYPAs working as early childhood professional on a military installations CDC can be
understood as the “figured world” formed through the social and situated activities of the
CYPAs. The CDC was the venue where CYPA’s were able to “figure” who they were as early
childhood professionals through the activities, various roles, and relationships they established in
connection to the work they did at the CDC as CYPAs. The CDC served as the location where
the CYPAS did their professional identity work. It was here CYPAs learned, interacted, and
construct who they were as early childhood professionals. It was within this figured world
CYPA’s encountered and experienced various forms of learning. As CYPAs talked about their
day-to-day activities and practices, it was revealed that the act of learning how to perform these
activities and practices was an important and unique practice of the CDC setting and to the
CYPAs as players in the figured world.

The CYPAs’ stories provided insight about their constructed identities as early childhood
professional through learning that was also informal and situated. The CYPAs explained that
they saw the value of formal degree learning in some contexts; however, in the particular context
of the CDC, there was a greater need for an approach to learning that was situated and directly
related to tasks and practices associated with who they were and the work they did as CYPAs at
a military CDC. In addition, their talk about instances of informal learning in the workplace also
acted as evidence for legitimizing and placing a spotlight on the significance of their social
participation in communities of practice for the CYPAs’ learning (Lave, 1991; Lave &
The CYPAs' stories that included examples of informal learning occurrences illustrated unstructured moments of reflection, collaboration, and facilitation (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

As CYPAs reflected on professional experiences, they also told stories and emphasized the importance of being able to develop relationships with others as they worked side-by-side and learned the numerous skills and practices needed to care and educate young children. As CYPAs shared stories, they also revealed that the opportunities they had to work with CYPAs with varying levels and years of experience and expertise resembled apprenticeship. There were mentions of teaching, learning, and teaching methods such as modeling, coaching, and scaffolding, all which were used to assist new, novice, and apprentice CYPAs as they managed and discovered knowledge (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) in relation to their development as early childhood professionals. As CYPAs talked about learning, they also implicitly talked about their views of learning as significant when occurring in a domain that allowed for the acquisition and development of specific skills and practices for caring for young children in the CDC setting. The learning CYPAs reflected on occurred alongside, as well as, under the guise of others who were more experienced than they were and in some cases just as experienced as they were.

The CYPAs’ identity formation and construction was presented as they reflected on their professional experiences. Findings support that CYPAs worked to form and construct who they were as early childhood professionals at a military CDC in terms of learning that was best suited for positively impacting their acquisition of specific skills, practices, and knowledge needed to carry out the many myriad of activities that were associated with the “figuring” of CYPAs as early childhood professionals. CYPAs constructed who they were as professionals in connection
to how they viewed their own and other CYPAs’ learning to do the work of CYPAs at a CDC on a military installation and based on what they knew how to do. They talked about who they were as professionals in terms of their learning to carry out various activities, handle situations, and teaching and learning from their past’s professional experiences as tools and resources for being identified as a CYPA early childhood professional. Additionally, CYPAs constructed themselves as early childhood professionals not only in regards to what they knew how to do, but with respect to different kinds of knowledge. CYPAs professional identities as early childhood professionals was impacted by their experiential learning. With respect to formal learning, CYPAS positioned their experiential learning as having more weight than formal degree learning in the context of the CDC.

I am aware of the complexity of work associated with identity work and am aware that this is only a small contribution in taking a more focused look at the professional identities of CYPAs as early childhood professionals. In the next chapter I will discuss the conclusion and implications for the field, practice, policy, and future research.
Chapter 6: Findings and Implications for the Field, Practice, Policy, and Research

This study examined the construction of the professional identities of CYPAs working at a CDC on a military installation. From a sociocultural perspective on learning and identities, I explored how the personal and professional learning experiences of CYPAs impacted their professional identities. I used the figured worlds, situated learning in communities of practice, and apprenticeship to look at the learning that occurred inside and outside of the CDC context where their professional identities were constructed and impacted mutually. This final chapter presents a discussion of the main findings of this study. Following the presentation of the findings, I discuss the implications for the field, practice, policy, and research.

Findings

CYPAs’ Personal and Professional Learning Most Impacted the Construction of their Identities as Early Childhood Professionals when it was Social and Occurred in Context

One of the main findings of this study was that CYPA personal and professional learning was most impactful, meaningful, and useful when it was attached to experiences that were social and situated in meaningful and contextualized manners. Chapters 4 and 5 captured the CYPAs’ personal and professional learning experiences that impacted the construction of their identities as early childhood professionals. Findings from these chapters revealed that it was through a variety of social activities and experiences that the CYPAs came to learn and develop a variety of skills, tools, practices, and resources that prepared them for the work they did as early childhood professionals. In Chapter 4, as CYPAs shared their personal experiences of being a part of a family, babysitting, and volunteering, they emphasized that these experiences were impactful because they were learning opportunities that occurred through engagement in action and interaction that was situated in contexts that called for them to work with children. The
CYPAs revealed that these experiences were valuable because of how they learned to care for children. They were learning while “in the trenches” as they were engaged in practice and situated the actual act. The experiences CYPAs spoke of were also impactful because they were in context that called for them to fully engage as novice caregivers. Being in situations where one has to actually engage in providing care for young children (i.e. babysitting, volunteering, and helping a part of a family) were what participants identified as real-life lessons that helped them become familiar with and develop various practices and skills that they employed as early childhood professionals.

While in chapter 5 as CYPAs talked about their professional learning experiences, they revealed they saw the value in various approaches to learning; however, they explicitly voiced their support for the valuing and legitimatization of informal learning as appropriate for the work they did as early childhood professionals in the CDC context. As CYPAs talked about their learning, it was seen that they constructed their professional identities through being active participants and members of a community of practice that shared and worked towards the common goals of becoming better at caring and educating young children.

In both chapters 4 and 5, the CYPAs emphasized learning as important and impactful because it involved others and it was contextualized. CYPAs shared stories that involved learning that occurred while working with and alongside other practitioners in the midst of them educating and caring for young children. their stories illustrated that it was through their active participation and engagement in the CDC context that served as their curriculum for their learning how to care and educate young children. It is also important because it draws attention to how individuals’ lives are full of valuable and legitimate experiences that produce a wealth of knowledge. It brings to the forefront the importance of actively seeking and identifying early
childhood providers’ prior knowledge and experiences as resources that can aid in the construction of their professional identities. Finally, this finding is important because it provides one example of how this particular group of early childhood providers’ learning impacted how they thought of and constructed themselves as professionals.

**Families were a Source of CYPAs Being Recruited into the Figured World of Early Childhood Professionals**

Another main finding of this study was related to CYPAs’ being recruited into the figured world of early childhood profession by way of their families. In chapter 4, participants spoke about feelings of preparedness to be CYPAs and early childhood professionals because of their previous personal experiences such as babysitting, volunteering, and being a part of a family. In each of these instances, family played a part in the CYPAs’ being brought into the figured world of early childhood professionals by being introduced to and taught a variety of practices and skills for caring for young children that were also associated with the work that they did as early childhood professionals. In each of the themes in Chapter 4, family members were instrumental in the recruiting of CYPAs into the figured world of early childhood professionals. Under the theme of babysitting, Ro and Mary were recruited through family. Ro spoke about her aunt asking her to babysit her cousins while she went out of town, and in Mary’s case, she became a babysitter for a family friend while caring for her own nephews. Nicla, Tee, Stela, Mary shared that being a part of a family was an experience that impacted their professional identity construction. As they talked about these experiences, what was common was the way in which family served as a source of recruitment into the figured world of early childhood professionals. The CYPAs shared that as a family member, there was an implicit expectation that they help in rearing and caring for a variety of younger family members such as siblings, nieces, nephews,
and cousins. The theme of volunteering revealed that Ro and Stela were both parents who volunteered as a means of staying involved with their children’s development and education. It was their involvement as parent volunteers for the sake of their children that recruited them into the world of early childhood professionals.

In social contexts, identity is constructed and produced as individuals engage in practice through their life experiences (Urrieta, 2007). This finding was important because it works to make explicit the social aspect of the processes involved in the shaping and constructing of identities. This particular finding from the study provided insight as to how CYPAs’ identities as early childhood professionals were constructed partly due to being recruited by way of their families. Through the actions of their families, they were provided with opportunities for engagement in experiences and activities that were social and provided foundational skills, practices and knowledge related to being early childhood professionals. The CYPAs’ processes of sense making and constructing who they were as early childhood professionals was impacted by their own past personal learning experiences of babysitting, volunteering, and being a family member that were all connected to family members.

**Learning on a Continuum**

As they talked about their own professional learning it was revealed that they valued but also made distinctions between various approached to learning. From this study the following approaches emerged: formal degree learning, formal professional development learning, and informal learning. Data from Chapter 5 revealed CYPAs’ explicitness in their awareness and differentiation among contexts for learning to learning. In general, CYPAS acknowledged and saw all approaches as having some value, possessing their own unique characteristics, and their level of importance was dependent upon context. In the context of the CDC, CYPAS positioned
experiential learning as more important than school-based learning, and they positioned themselves as early childhood professionals accordingly.

These findings were important because they addressed the assumption that learning is static; it is important because it not only speaks to but also challenges traditional more accepted notions of learning that posit that it had to be an individual, intentional, formal act with a definite beginning and ending. This finding shows the legitimacy of other approaches to learning, it makes space for the inclusion of a variety of ways to learn. It includes variations and places them on a learning continuum. When placed on a continuum these approaches to learning are options, tools, and resources for teaching and learning. It creates opportunities for there to be a variety of approaches when it comes to learning. Chapter 5 served as a way to present CYPAs’ conceptualization of professional learning in connection to the construction of CYPAs as early childhood professionals. It was found that the CYPAs were aware of and often felt the tension surrounding traditional views of learning as only legitimate when connected to formal institutions of higher learning and degrees; however, chapter 5 also revealed that while CYPAs did recognize the value of formal degree learning, they also valued and chose to legitimate informal learning as well.

**Implications for the Field**

While this research offers implications for the overall field it also creates several questions. For example, what and who are to be considered teachers in early childhood contexts? What is the best level of qualifications for those working in a variety of settings with young children? What terminology is appropriate when talking about early childhood? Addressing these and similar questions is beyond the scope of this research, but other scholars have offered suggestions for moving forward with terminology that is more universal for the
field (Falk, 2003; Goffin & Washington, 2007; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2009). Generally, there has been an agreement from experts that in the upcoming years there will be a challenge in working towards defining the field as well as progressing in a direction of higher quality. In the field of early childhood there is a “well-acknowledged and highly problematic lack of definitional clarity around a number of key terms and concepts” (Kagan, Kauerz, and Tarrant, 2008, p. 131). One of the many obstacles in defining a field deals with how the field is framed through discourses, messages, and language that is consistent. Considerations for working towards this goal includes using language with positive connotations (i.e. “education,” “educator,” “school”) (Falk, 2003). Another consideration the includes actively communicating with and making the general public aware of the positive outcomes and overall benefits of high-quality programs and professionals. It also includes the establishing of a more universal, shared language, as well as comprehension about specific characteristics that are used when referring to high quality programs and highly qualified professionals.

In regards to the overall field of early childhood, the variety of settings and options that encompasses early childhood care and education for young children beckons that attention and consideration be given to the rethinking of how we approach and appropriate the term early childhood professionals. The CYPAs in this study, while confidently self-identifying as early childhood professionals, revealed they were also aware and at times negatively impacted when they were not seen, considered, or identified as professionals by others. In conjunction with other researchers (Falk, 2003; Great Start DC, 2011; Goffin & Washington, 2007; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2009; Kirp, 2008) suggestions for addressing and improving this issue in the field is for there to be action that focuses on the inclusion of early childhood practitioners’ voices to be
included in the work towards creating broader definitions that include mix of characteristics for the identification and construction of early childhood professionals.

Implications for Practice

Reflection

Scholars have stressed the importance, benefits, and overall positive impacts of early childhood educators’ being provided with varied opportunities and forms of reflection (Akbari, 2007; Chen, Martin, & Erdosi-Mehaffey, 2017; Freeman, Dalli, & Pickering, 2016; Lemon & Garvis, 2014). The act of reflection is powerful, and it aids in the personal, and professional, growth and construction of individuals. Growth is possible when we begin to look back on our own lives, experiences, and practices as means for drawing conclusions about events and trajectories, then make decisions to change our actions and behaviors as a result. The inclusion of regular, on-going, meaningful reflection creates space for early childhood professionals to be empowered and identify their own sense of agency. The findings of my research provide insights regarding specific benefits and positive impact of providing early childhood professionals with purposeful and intentional opportunities to reflect on their own experiences and practices in connection with the construction of their professional identities. Reflection in a safe environment fosters the construction on professional identities in terms of individual and collect histories and experiences. Reflection also provides opportunities for early childhood professionals to work towards improving the quality of care and education they offer young children by having the chance to engage in social learning that fosters creating, exchanging, and making connections with other early childhood professionals. Additionally, in this study CYPAs’ reflections served as opportunities for them to see their own transformations and construction of their professional identities as they talked about their progression from peripheral participation to full participants in the figured world of early childhood professionals.
**Professional Development and Training**

Chen, Martin, and Erdosi-Mehaffey (2017) assert that the 2015 shared mission and goal of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education World Conference to provide access to high quality care and education for young children was troubled with a number of challenges including practitioners’ limited professional knowledge and skills. They suggest that in order to attend to this particular issue there needs to be a sustained pathway of professional development for practitioners (Chen, Martin, & Erdosi-Mehaffey, 2017). The findings from my study provide first-hand information and suggestions from the voices of practitioners regarding their own experiences with learning in professional developments and training. The CYPAs who participated in this study offered their voices and input regarding specific qualities (i.e. relevant, comfortable) and ideas of the types of learning (e.g. hands-on learning with others) that are best practices for professional development and training. CYPAs deemed these qualities and ideas about learning as necessary to equip early childhood professionals as professionals as well as to enhance the knowledge and skills needed to implement high quality practices for the education and care for young children. According to Chen, Martin, and Erdosi-Mehaffey (2017), another issue is that there is no systematic and unified set of guidelines that define professional development. Information from this research could be used as references and building blocks for the creation of a more unified definition and system of professional development for early childhood professionals.

**Implications for Policy**

There has been a rise in federal and state services connected to early childhood education, but the “non-system” in its current condition is unable to accommodate such expansion. Even though “developmental neuroscience demonstrates that young children thrive when they have consistent on-going relationships with qualified early educators over time,” most states struggle
to recruit and retain high quality and highly qualified early childhood educators (National Governor’s Association, 2010, p.1). The findings of my research show that there is very little research that seeks to explore the identities of early childhood professionals that work with young children in settings preceding the entering of formal school. Exploring the construction of early childhood professional identities in connections with their learning provides knowledge regarding the creating and implementation of policy that addresses issues in the recruitment and retention of high quality early childhood professionals.

The Improving Head Start Act of 2007 called for the governor of each state to establish an advisory council on early childhood education and care (National Governor’s Association, 2011). In 2010, 45 states received $100 million in grants for three-year start-up funds for these councils (Alaska, Idaho, Indiana, North Dakota, and South Dakota did not receive grant money) (National Governor’s Association, 2011). These councils were tasked with improving the quality of education and care for children birth through age 5 in their states, part of which was aligning services amongst agencies (Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center, 2011). A main goal of the legislation was to encourage the growth of a more coordinated system of professional development and training for teachers in having children school ready. Other responsibilities included measuring what Head Start teachers should know, and performing a needs assessment in terms of career planning for early childhood educators (Pre-K Now, 2007, p. 2). Findings from my research, and future research on this population, could potentially serve to inform such councils about creating policies that are more inclusive and considerate of various early childhood education settings (i.e. CDCs on military installations) and its implications for creating a system of professional development that leads to a variety of paths to becoming early childhood professionals capable of working in a variety of early childhood settings.
Additionally, federal and state policy should offer a variety of paths leading to be considered highly qualified and professional in the field of early childhood.

In addition to legislative action, early childhood associations and accrediting agencies could find information about the CDC workforce useful for their work in establishing educational criteria. The most recent revision to the program accreditation criteria from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) went into effect September 2006. The language of the newest NAEYC accreditation criteria required teachers to enroll in and complete a baccalaureate program— the same qualification required to teach in most public school districts (Report on Preschool Programs, 2005). NAEYC’s accreditation criterion 6.A.05 states the following:

All teachers have a minimum of an associate’s degree or equivalent. At least 75% of teachers have a minimum of a baccalaureate degree or equivalent in early childhood education, child development, elementary education, or early childhood special education, and this training encompasses child development and learning of children birth through kindergarten; family and community relationships; observing, documenting, and assessing young children; teaching and learning; and professional practices and development (NAEYC, 2011, p.1).

Possibly from the outside looking in this qualification seemed, in the minds of parents, policymakers and possibly CYS administrators, to somehow guarantee an increase in the quality of CYPAs; however, the participants in my study show how these types of discourse in policy, among others, that created tensions between formal and informal learning.
The findings from this study also place focus on the need for a shift and rethinking about assumptions regarding formal learning and knowledge as the only markers of highly qualified early childhood educators. The findings from this current study indicated that in this particular context there were individuals that met the above criteria and often times did not stay long in the CDCs and were often trained by professionals who did not possess formal education (degree) but were able to do so because of their knowledge acquired from learning that was relevant, social, and situated. Knowledge about the learning and the construction of early childhood professionals’ identities could influence both state and national policy discussions related to the educational qualifications of the early childhood professional workforce. As state councils on early childhood work to create more of a system of delivery leading to alignment with state public school standards, and associations strive to implement the best standards in staff qualifications, knowledge about the possibility that previous personal and professional experiences of individuals seeking to be early childhood professionals may have equipped them for the field will be important to consider.

While credentialing is one way to measure qualifications, the CYPAs in this study emphasized the role that social learning (i.e., communities of practice, situated learning) played in their being becoming qualified and recognized as early childhood professionals. In addition, the number of CYPAs who entered the field prior to completing formal education suggests that early childhood is still very much an apprenticeship-model field, where they learn on-the-job, especially in settings prior to the formal school years (K-12). While striving to create high qualifications for those working with young children, licensing and accrediting bodies should use their understandings of situated learning, experiential learning and communities of practice models to consider planning alternative pathways to professional qualification. Providing
professional growth models and perhaps also alternative models of credentialing (e.g. micro-credentialing) that stress and focus on experiential learning, situated learning, and communities of practice can help support teachers that may not have opportunities to obtain or continue their formal education. This research also offers considerations for purposefully consulting practitioners for considerations addressing their overall learning needs as well as for input regarding improving professional development and training systems for those working in the field of early childhood education.

Suggestions for Future Research

While the current study focused on the impact of personal and professional learning experiences in relation to the construction of CYPAs’ identities as early childhood professionals, there are opportunities left for exploring other factors that impact and contribute to the construction of CYPAs’ identities as early childhood professionals. Unfortunately, due to most of the research on early childhood professional workforce being skewed toward highly-educated teachers working in high-quality centers, future research could first work towards the identification of the portion of the workforce that does not fit into the highly-educated category through surveys, aiming to first get a better sense of demographics and characteristics. Additionally, CYPAs in this population did not focus specifically on wages or turnover, while the research literature is overwhelmingly concerned with these factors. Future research could attempt to explore and answer other questions such as:

- What are the current demographics of the early childhood workforce?
- How do different states’ educational requirements differ/correspond to the educational requirements of military CDCs?
- What approach to learning is most ideal for increasing quality and stability among CYPAs at CDCs?
• What do the career paths of CYPAs look like while working at CDCs on a military installation?

• Have the increased NAEYC accreditation criteria for increased staff qualifications affected center quality and child outcomes at military CDCs, and how?

Answering these questions could lead to more understanding of the context in which CYPAs work, and the professional development and training that are ideal for them. Additionally, answering these questions could provide ways to help address the issue of better equipping and preparing early childhood professionals with what is needed in order for them to provide high-quality care and education for young children.

**Conclusion**

This study examined nine CYPAs’ personal and professional experiences as a way to focus on gaining a better understanding of the way in which they, in the specific context of a CDC on a military installation, constructed their identities as early childhood professionals. Through the exploration of their personal and professional learning experiences, the findings of this qualitative case study enabled me to observe and interpret CYPAs’ individual and collective complex processes of professional identity construction as early childhood professionals. Choosing to explore the construction of CYPAs professional identity using lenses that connected their personal and professional experiences to the larger social context, enabled me to better understand how learning impacted CYPAs’ “figuring” of who they were as early childhood professionals. These lenses also made explicit connections between how knowledge produced as part of their day-to day-practices impacted CYPAs “becoming” and “constructing” themselves as early childhood professionals. Through the use of a qualitative case study, I believe that I accomplished my overall goal of providing insight about how CYPAs construct their identities as
early childhood professionals. I addition to accomplishing my overall goal, I also accomplished the following in this work:

- provided a space for the voice of CYPAs as early childhood professionals in the context of a CDC on a military installation
- made early childhood professionals the focus of research.
References


http://curriculum.calstatela.edu/faculty/psparks/theorists/501vygot.htm


Appendix A: First Individual Interview

I just want you to tell me about your past up until you became a CYPA and you can include any experiences you think may have helped you prepare for being a CYPA and working with children.

- What brought you this work?

- Events/person(s) that influenced you (Who and what inspired you)?

- What skills and knowledge do you bring to your work?

- What is the history of these skills and knowledge?

- Was there anyone in your life that may have first noticed these skills and knowledge? Can you tell us a story about how it might have been visible to them?
Appendix B: Second Individual Interview

I just want you to tell me about what you actually do as a CYPA. If it would help, you are more than welcomed to reconstruct a typical day as a CYPA from the moment you wake up until the time you go to bed, if that makes a little easier. Please be as detailed as possible.

- How do you know how to do some of those things you mentioned as a part of your work as a CYPA?
- Who taught you or how did you learn how to do those things?
Appendix C: Third Individual Interview

Thinking about what you have shared about your life before becoming a CYPA and early childhood professional and then thinking about what you have shared about your learning and the work you do now as a CYPA, how do you make sense and understand who you are as an early childhood professional?

- Have you always felt that way? If so what helped you to see yourself in that light?
- If not, how did you see yourself at first? What happened to change that thought/view of yourself that you currently hold?
Appendix D: Focus Group Interview

Prior to the focus group I asked each of you to collect and bring with you 3-5 items that you consider to be representations of who you are and/or what you do as CYPAs.

1. When you see these images what are some of the things it makes you think about your professional identity?

2. Could you share with me what you think the roles and responsibilities of CYPAs are and how did you come up with this idea?

3. How would you describe yourself professionally?
   a. What has contributed to the ways you think of yourself professionally?

4. Could you share an experience that helped you shape the way you see yourself professionally?
Appendix E: Researcher Journaling Entry Samples

Entry 1

I found myself wondering more and more about what it is really like to be an early childhood professional at a child development center on a military installation while working as an administrator at a CDC. I realized from the very beginning that my former position as a vocational early childhood teacher for high school students was very different from what I was expected to do as a TACS and I no longer had 15-18-year-old students, I was an administrator in charge of real life training, support, and curriculum design for a real group of adults and children. While making this transition I knew I was technically “qualified” however nevertheless I fumbled and struggled with constructing my own professional identity. As I began working alongside the CYPAS at the child development center I was amazed at all the work they did not only for the children at the center but all the prep work and most of all the learning that occurred at so many levels, at so many times, and in so many ways. I was in awe and held a deep admiration and immeasurable level of respect for this group of individuals that worked in this unique setting. It was not until I was confronted with the comfort for some and discomfort for others of me referring to the CYPAS as times teachers and others early childhood professionals. After a few informal conversations with some of the CYPAs it dawned on me that based on what I deemed as important I was guilty of imposing a professional identity on this group without ever consulting them. After my confrontation I found myself being drawn to the notion of spending quality time interviewing and seeking out the CYPAs and wanting to hear their voices as a way to provide insight in regards to who they are professionally and what impacts those identities.

Entry 2

I often wondered while working at the CDC if I had any impact on how they saw themselves as professionals. I went to school and have these degrees but this is a completely different world. I
know academic stuff about how child grow and development and as far as what is considered developmentally appropriate but the CDC is so different. I still had to humble myself and take my first month to work with another TACS at another center to just get an idea about how the CDC operates what I am supposed to do and not do. I can see that the classes I took in high school helped a lot as far as knowing how to do observations, and curriculum. Even though I took those classes and worked in the church nursery and volunteered at all those kid camps, I still had to come into the CDC and be open minded and trained by someone else. This degree is good and it prepared me for the work I did as a high school teacher but this is something different. The skills and qualities needed to be a TACS I got once I got on the job. Don get it twisted, the school stuff was good and I needed it to even be considered for this job, but it wasn’t enough. The cool thing about it is when I came to the CDC as a parent and a volunteer I got a leg up by being in the class with CYPAs and kids and actually got to do some of the things they did. Even the PAB worked in my favor. It was there that I learned about NAEYC. I would have never known how to answer that interview question if I had not been in that position.

I wonder if my participants will feel this way. I worked hard to make them feel like professionals when I was there. I didn’t care that they had degrees or not. I saw the work they did and how hard they worked to go to all sorts of workshops and professional development to learn new stuff to bring back to share with the other CYPAs and try in the classroom. I think that is what learning is all about. I know that other people see them as babysitters. I say them, I think they look at me that way too. I know that all of us do so much more than just watch children. Even though all CYPAs don’t have degrees I think that the way the CDC is set up allows for there to be on the job intense training. The position structure of having different levels like leads and mentors is great when individuals are in those positions who are really
knowledgeable about the work at hand and are willing to really act as mentors for those that they work with.

I am really worried about the ideology/notion that everybody needed to have a degree or degrees to be seen as a teacher or even to be considered a professional versus those who don’t have degrees but are awesome from all the experience they have. I am at odds with myself, I want to say that experience is more important but I think that just like in my own case it is the perfect situation when a CYPA possess tons of experience and school/ degree education as well.

Entry 3

As I spent time conducting initial observations I worried that my former position as TACS would deter individuals from wanting to participate and lend their voices in exploring my research questions. I was pleasantly surprised when the nine individuals that attended the interest meeting shared that the reason they attended the interest meeting was because during our time working together even though they considered themselves professionals it was reassuring to hear it from some else. My participants explained that the way I treated and referred to them gave them a sense of support that identified them as professional teachers not babysitters. They also explained that that served as their motivation for making a commitment and dedicating time to share their own voices and experiences for my particular research from start to finish. I was relieved I was able to stay on track with my research and could continue exploring how CYPAs on a military installation constructed their professional identities as early childhood teachers.
Vita

Katherine Susan Clark earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Human Sciences with a concentration in Human Development and Family Studies and an endorsement in Secondary Education from Mississippi State University in 2006. In 2013, she received her Masters of Education in Instructional Specialist with a concentration in Early Childhood from the University of Texas at El Paso. In 2013 she joined the doctoral program in Teaching, learning, and Culture at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Ms. Clark received numerous honors and awards including being selected as an AERA Division K Graduate Student Pre-Conference Seminar Participant, honorable mention for the UTEP Outstanding Teaching Award for Graduate Students, UTEP Student Travel Grant, and the AAA Shirley Brice Heath New CAE Scholar Travel Stipend. While pursuing her doctorate she worked as a Training and Curriculum Specialist at a local Military Child Development Center, as well as a preceptor, instructor, and research assistant at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Ms. Clark presented her research at national conference meetings including the American Association for Behavioral and Social Sciences (AABSS), and the American Association of Anthropology (AAA). Additionally, she has presented professional development workshops for organizations such as the Paso Del Norte Association for the Education of Young Children (PDNAEYCY), and the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children (NMAEYCY). Ms. Clark’s dissertation entitled “The Professional Identities of Child and Youth Program Assistants (CYPA) at a Military Installation,” was supervised by Dr. Erika Mein.

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