

PERCEIVED INFLUENCES OF SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES ON  
EARLY-CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS' TEACHING PRACTICES

by Lyn Schaefer

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education, Educational Sustainability  
at

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point

Approved on August 23, 2021 by the following Committee:

Committee Chair:: Dr. Oluyomi Ogunnaike

Committee Member: Dr. Kendra Liddicoat

Committee Member: Dr. Catherine Scheder

Committee Member: Dr. Henry St. Maurice

@ Copyright 2021 by Lyn Schaefer

## **Abstract**

The first purpose of this qualitative study was to explore self-reported significant life experiences of early-childhood educators to determine how experiences of traditional pre-K educators differed from those who taught in nature-based programs. The second purpose was to explore whether these experiences influenced their teaching practices. I interviewed ten traditional pre-K teachers and ten nature-based teachers to obtain reports on whether early experiences influence their teaching practices. The nature-based participants were reportedly more influenced by early outdoor experiences and the traditional pre-K participants were reportedly more influenced by role models. The findings from the nature-based participants align with prior research on significant life experiences. That is, those who have memories of early outdoor experiences continue to exhibit concern for the environment in their adult lives emphasizing the importance of outdoor experiences for all young children. I recommend that the philosophy and practice of nature-based programs should become part of teacher preparation programs.

## Acknowledgments

To Monica Wiedel-Lubinski and Emily Woodmansee from Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS) and Dr. Yvette Butler-Yeboah from Gap-Buster, Inc., thanks for your assistance in soliciting participants. You never hesitated when I asked for help.

Thanks to the Cohort 2 survivors. On June 18, 2018, when we stood together as strangers for a class photo, none of us could have guessed what the next few years would bring – a special thank you to my Teams chat buddy, Bethany Redbird, for seeing the humor in the experience.

I want to thank the participants in this study. It goes without saying that I couldn't have done this without you. I hope to actually meet each and every one of you in person someday.

To my niece, Amanda OudenHoven, thank you for your patience with my Zoom practice sessions, your consenting to do an interview (that I then never used), and your ability to 'roll with it' when I would send you what I assured you was the 'absolutely last' transcript to code only to follow it with another and another.

Thank you to Dr. Oluyomi, Ogunnaike for calling my work 'incredible' when it was only two pages long and far from incredible, to Dr. Kendra Liddicoat for providing your dissertation as an exemplary model to follow, to Dr. Catherine Scheder for reminding me this process was a marathon and not a sprint, and to Dr. Henry St. Maurice who saved a place in his queue for my writing and went way beyond reviewing for format, structure, and style.

## Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
List of Figures.....	4
List of Tables.....	4
Author’s Note.....	5
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	7
Context.....	9
Positionality.....	10
Purpose.....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Significance.....	13
Summary.....	13
Chapter 2. Review of Literature.....	15
Outdoors in Early-childhood Education.....	15
Significant Life Experiences.....	19
Summary.....	21
Chapter 3. Method.....	23
Design.....	23
Procedure.....	24
Data Collection.....	25
Data Analyses.....	26
Trustworthiness.....	28
Summary.....	29
Chapter 4. Findings.....	30
Participants.....	30
Influences.....	32
Educational Goals.....	33
Significant Life Experiences.....	36

Teaching Practice .....	39
Summary .....	41
Chapter 5. Conclusions & Recommendations .....	42
Discussion .....	42
Conclusions .....	43
Recommendations .....	46
Summary .....	50
Postscript.....	51
References.....	52
Appendix A. Approvals, Solicitations, & Consents .....	57
Appendix B. Protocol.....	63
Appendix C. Codebook.....	64

### **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Data Analysis.....	27
------------------------------	----

### **List of Tables**

Table 1. Coding for Children’s Educational Goals.....	33
Table 2. Significant Life Experiences.....	37
Table 3. SLE Influences on Teaching Practice.....	39

### **Author's Note**

It is 9:00 A.M. and the day is already hot and humid. The gravel parking lot is surrounded by trees and most of the observers stand in the shadow of the trees. The guide gives a brief history of the Nature School and then leads the observers down a narrow dirt path to a clearing in the woods. The air in the clearing reeks of bug repellent and sunscreen but it is cooler. It is also very quiet and it takes a moment to realize there are children playing in the clearing. There are children huddled under a tepee-like structure constructed from fallen branches, another group balances on a seesaw made from a large fallen tree, a third group digs in some wet mud near the edge of a shallow body of water, and a lone boy runs from one end of the clearing to the other carrying a boomerang size stick. There are no manufactured educational tools or playground equipment. The Nature School is a forest kindergarten in Massachusetts. The children will spend the entire day outdoors only seeking shelter in a storage shed if it should lightning. The guide leads the observers down another path, warning us to be mindful of the poison ivy along the trail. The well-worn path has intermittent tree roots and rocks to walk around, and we pass a teacher who is tending to a gash on her shin from tripping on the path. At the Dragon's Breath clearing, so named because of a recent fire, a boy is using a small hatchet to chop down wood while the other children in this clearing sit around a teacher and a campfire. We leave this area and wind our way back past an area called the Bear's Den because of the rock overhang that created a huge cave, and then walk back to the parking lot.

Two classrooms at the Nature Preschool in Massachusetts look very similar to preschool classrooms across the country. Children's artwork hangs on the wall, there is a book corner, and a miniature kitchen area. One of the classrooms holds a small tent with some child-sized camp chairs surrounding a faux campfire. Outside, there is a short path that leads to a

clearing where several pieces of human-made structures (e.g., mud pie kitchen, tree cookies and branches, tepee) are available for children's use. Another path leads to a vegetable and flower garden tended by children, and yet another path circles around the grounds. Children spend part of their day indoors and part of their day outdoors in this nature-based preschool.

The above narratives describe what is referred to as nature-based education (NBE). The terms "nature-based preschool" and "forest kindergarten or forest school" fall under the overarching umbrella of nature-based education and are often used synonymously when referring to early-childhood programs that devote at least part of the program day to outdoor learning. In the case of forest schools, the children are outside the entire time they are in attendance at the school. Apart from the difference in the time spent outdoors, nature preschool and forest kindergartens differ on how learners are prepared for kindergarten and beyond. According to Sobel (2016), nature preschools embrace a cognitive readiness mindset with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, but forest kindergartens embrace an initiative mindset that emphasizes socio-emotional, and physical development; and acquisition of problem-solving skills through engagement with the outdoors regardless of weather conditions.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Nature-based education (NBE) for young children has its origins in Germany and the Scandinavian countries, where NBE or the forest kindergarten movement began in the 1960s and enjoyed heightened popularity in the 1990s. Students enrolled in forest kindergartens learned how to play and played to learn by being in nature. Although the forest kindergarten curriculum is often based on the changing seasons (Bennett, 2009), the learners discover and embrace the art of promoting joy and preservation of nature.

In the United States, the origins of NBE coincided with the advent of Earth Day in 1970. Compared to the outdoor emphasis in Scandinavia, in the United States, the NBE approach tends to focus on utilizing both the indoors and the outdoors to promote learning. At this time, there are approximately 585 nature-based preschools in the U.S. (Natural Start Alliance, 2020); more than doubling the number in the last three years. Nature-based preschools have typically been defined (Sobel, 2016) as a licensed early-childhood program for three- to five-year-old learners to spend 25 to 50% of the time outside. The indoor and outdoor curricula in such programs is largely guided and informed by a nature-inspired philosophy. These programs are likely to provide natural resources such as wood, barks of trees, potted plants, and more to foster exploration. Outside, the program engages young learners to experience nature through their sense of touch, sight, smell, etc. Learners observe, discuss, and discover through hands-on participation (Rivkin, 2014). For example, time outdoors might be spent observing the sky and clouds, feeling wind, rain, or snow on their faces, sniffing and smelling the flowers around them, listening to the sounds of birds and squirrels, or exploring rough and smooth textures.

Many families of young children reminisce about their childhoods spent outside in nature, but their concerns about NBE overshadow these memories and a more traditional environment is often their selection for a pre-K experience. At the forefront of these concerns is that there is little causal or correlational research supporting children's readiness for school following their NBE experience. Because an emphasis on literacy and math skills is not as evident in an NBE program, families question whether their children will be prepared for formal schooling (Hunter et al., 2019). The benefits of play and experiential learning for young children are well-documented (Kuo, Barnes, & Jordan, 2019), but the prospect of NBE as an alternative to traditional preschool programming continues to be met with skepticism from some families.

One of the premises of NBE and of many early education programs is that children construct their own knowledge through play and active exploration. That is, the curriculum is based on the interests of the children and is often emergent in nature or as Dewey (1933) wrote prior knowledge is expanded by new experiences leading to new actions. For example, a teacher may not demonstrate whether a rock, a stick, or a feather will float in a container of water but will have those materials available for the children to experiment. Torquati, Cutler, Gilkerson, and Sarver (2013) used the term "emergent curriculum" to describe learning based on children's interests, prior experiences, and curiosity to self-discover (p. 740). Programs that emphasize emergent learning permit the teacher to have an individual relationship with each child as the teacher actively engages in their interests. This learning environment is different than preparing pre-planned lesson plans and does not fit the practices of all teachers. Observers, and critics, of emergent learning may view this learning environment as unstructured with little tangible evidence that children are actually learning. However, Biermeir (2015) wrote that

given the diversity of children taught in preschool programs, accepting a “canned recipe for teaching, evaluation, and assessment is problematic at best” (p.3).

Besides differences in pedagogy, cultural contexts also differ among forest schools, nature-based programs, and traditional preschool programs. Two experts in the field of early-childhood education (ECE) environmental design, Curtis and Carter (2015), noted that many NBE programs, particularly in Europe tend to utilize a more expansive vision that integrates both indoor and outdoor space in their ECE programs. In Scandinavia this type of learning environment is referred to as *Udeskole*. *Udeskole* refers not only to the place and the frequency of the outdoor experience but also to the pedagogical approach which strives for a more “widened education” (Barfod, 2018, p. 206). The *Udeskole*, symbolizes both cultural and historical identity in Scandinavia and supports the forest kindergartens as an established form of early-childhood program (MacQuarrie, Nugent, & Warden, 2015). In *Udeskole*, teachers are not mandated to use “prescribed” materials or activities. As such, teachers are guided by learners’ interests in planning outdoor curriculum. Yet, despite the autonomy teaching in a forest kindergarten or nature-based program provides, Maynard, Waters, and Clement (2013) observed that during outdoor interactions and learning, Welsh teachers reported feeling “less like teachers”, had difficulty with “relinquishing control to the children” and were reluctant to go outdoors (p. 295). In this study, I will investigate the reported experiences of teachers in two types of preschool programs; traditional pre-K programs and nature-based programs.

## **Context**

When families retrieve their children from traditional pre-K programs and ask what they did that day, they are likely to see a picture they painted or hear about an experience on the playground or a song that they learned or listen to their child tell a story about what another

child ate, said, or did. Children in traditional pre-K programs often take nature walks, watch seeds germinate, and pick up worms; all memories and experiences in the very brief life of a young child. These memories and experiences influence the adults they will become and were facilitated by the teachers in their classrooms who also have had their own life experiences that influence their teaching practices.

Research on significant life experiences (SLEs) was identified as a “new research area in environmental education” (Tanner, 1980, p. 20). His research explored the relationship between the self-reported early experiences of active conservationists and their later interests. Tanner concluded that early experiences outdoors and in the environment were dominant influences in respondent’s later lives. During the decades that followed Tanner’s work, research into the impact of SLEs has been replicated in a variety of settings resulting in the same findings; the source of later environmental attitudes and actions are influenced by early experiences with a positive role model and in time spent outdoors (Chawla, 2006). There is a caveat to this conclusion. The focus of SLE research has typically concentrated on a participant sample of individuals who are self-identified environmentalists and environmental educators (Stevenson et al., 2014) leaving a gap in research on SLEs that provides a comparison group (i.e., participants either without a background in environmental activism or without an extensive history in outdoor activity). Critics of SLE research question whether the assertion that those who later in life become stewards of the environment were motivated by early experiences are simply using selective recall in retelling a SLE. Another criticism is the inability to verify the SLE.

### **Positionality**

This study has its origins in my readings of the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1938, 1990). His philosophy was based on the assumption that good programming was

dependent on the outdoor world because that was where life occurred. He saw the isolation and artificiality of traditional schools. Dewey (1938) wrote, “The life of the child would extend out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields and forests. He would have his excursions, his walks and talks, in which the larger world out of doors would be open to him (p. 35). I am embracing an early thought of Dewey’s that is still pertinent; every experience leads to change; it may be negative or it may be positive.

Although my childhood was immersed in such outdoor experiences as Dewey described, my experience as a K-12 student did not include field trips or any type of outdoor experience besides recess which was typified by jumping rope or playing soccer on a concrete parking lot. I have only one memory of ever leaving the classroom. As a high-school sophomore, my biology teacher led an excursion to a woodsy area called Thousand Islands and we plotted what we found on a three-foot by three-foot square piece of land. As a teacher, I took my students on nature walks but admittedly, we were just as likely to watch construction vehicles as we were seasonal changes. If presented with the opportunity to teach in a nature-based classroom, would my past experiences impact the opportunity for the students? Would my past experiences with nature impact my teaching practice in a traditional pre-K classroom?

### **Purpose**

My purpose in this study is to explore self-reported effects of SLEs reported by teachers from both NBE programs and from traditional pre-K programs, and to investigate how these experiences have influenced teachers’ actions and practices in the classroom. I explored the effects of SLEs reported by teachers from both NBE programs and from the more traditional pre-K program, and how these experiences influenced their actions. For example, one might expect that teachers who frequently camped or hiked as children would have established

behaviors and teaching practices different than teachers whose childhood was in a more urban setting. To extrapolate even further, one might expect that these same teachers would instruct differently and their level of comfort would be very different in a NBE setting.

### **Research Questions**

The specific research questions for this study will parse out the self-reports of practicing NBE and traditional pre-K teachers:

- What significant life experiences do early-childhood educators report as having contributed to their teaching practices?
- Do reported significant life experiences differ for educators in NBE programs and those in traditional pre-K programs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Hacking, Cushing, and Barratt (2019) described SLEs as “important phenomenological events considered critical in determining or influencing concerns, beliefs, and actions in later life” (p. 2). The experiences can be single momentous events or regular experiences over time. Chawla (2006) noted that the strengths of research on SLEs were that it was qualitative when most environmental education research was quantitative, allowed for participants’ own explanation of incidents, and provided a glimpse into the span of lifelong learning. The weaknesses of SLE research according to Chawla, lie in issues of inconsistency and reliability (p. 365). For example, while the initial prompt to a participant may be the same for all participants, the follow-up question may differ depending on the response to the first question. There are also concerns with inter-rater reliability. The lack of a comparison group since each participant is essentially in the experimental group is also noted as a concern. A final concern is the inability to corroborate the participant’s narrative.

## **Significance**

The significance of this study is its potential of adding concrete information to the discussion, and most importantly, to influence educators who are not necessarily environmental educators to embrace their evolving roles. Davis (2007) wrote that the early-childhood community has been slow to embrace the challenge of instructing children in sustainability (p. 7). National organizations of early-childhood professionals are just now beginning to grapple with the idea of explaining the importance of environmental stewardship to young children to some extent because those instructing the young children may not have a pre-disposition to this role. In 2020, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) convened a voluntary group to discuss methods of incorporating sustainability into the ECE curriculum for teachers in both NBE and traditional pre-K environments. It is my hope that this study will advance those goals.

## **Summary**

As Louv (2005) wrote in his national bestseller *Last Child in the Woods* raising concern about the lack of time each succeeding generation of children spends outside resulting in what he referred to as nature-deficit disorder. Despite his warnings and parents' concern about too much screen time, my own personal observations at numerous traditional pre-K programs would indicate children's accessibility to the outdoors and to nature is still very limited. The opportunity to play learning games on the computer is a far more popular activity for children than the dress-up area and certainly far more popular than the science center which frequently only exists of a few rocks, some pinecones, and a few plastic zoo animals. If these early learning experiences influence later behaviors and actions, are early-childhood educators adequately

preparing children for the future? And, were they prepared themselves for teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## **Chapter 2. Review of Literature**

The purpose of this study was to explore self-reported effects of significant life experiences of teachers from both NBE programs and from traditional pre-K programs, and to investigate how these self-reported experiences influenced teachers' actions and practices in the classroom. In this study, I defined a classroom as either a traditional four-walled environment or as an outdoor space with parameters defined by natural landmarks (e.g., large rock, wooden fence, etc.). The specific research questions for this study parse out the narratives of practicing NBE and traditional pre-K teachers:

- What significant life experiences do early-childhood educators report as having contributed to their teaching practice?
- Do reported significant life experiences differ for educators in NBE programs and those in traditional pre-K programs?

This chapter will begin with a review of the literature on current environmental education practices of early-childhood educators in both traditional and nature-based programs. The chapter will continue with a discussion of the research on the origins and influence of significant life experiences on an individual's future behavior and actions.

### **Outdoors in Early-childhood Education**

According to Elkind (2020), "In early-childhood education, teachers play a significant role in supporting young children's psychosocial growth and development" (p. 78). Despite benefits early-childhood educators report in nature-based education, the opportunity to spend classroom time outdoors is often met with mixed results. For example, in the United Kingdom, the adoption of forest schools was not completely embraced and practiced with fidelity. In 2001, the Welsh Assembly Government announced proposals for what was described as a

“Foundation Phase” for young children (p.255). The foundation phase promotes a play-based approach to learning in both indoor and outdoor environments (Maynard & Waters, 2007). Maynard and Waters also conducted research on how eight teachers implemented the indoor and outdoor environments in educating young learners. They reported that the teachers mentioned an increase in how they used the outdoor environment compared to their previous practices. However, the reported increase in outdoor engagement was somewhat limited. The teachers were outside only in good weather and used the same indoor pedagogical approaches in their outdoor explorations. That is, the teachers engaged in teacher-directed tasks that focused on the learning of subject knowledge and basic skills. Further, the teachers engaged in minimal use of the natural environments as they limited explorations to the normal school yard.

In 2013, Maynard, Waters, and Clement replicated this study and found similar results. As before, the teachers used the outdoor environment in good weather with restricted explorations of the natural environment. Indoor pedagogy was utilized outdoors to promote subject knowledge and basic skills. Although these focused on one small sample, the findings may reflect what is considered culturally important in early-childhood education; teachers resort to the training they received in preparation programs to instruct students in skill acquisition. Further, educators might have received little or no training for the implementation of a play-based or nature-based approach to outdoor learning and for many the nature-based approach was not an intuitive adjustment.

These findings were not unique to the United Kingdom. In a study of pre-service teachers in Sweden (Arlemalm-Hagser, 2017), 76 student teachers kept blogs relating their experiences with early-childhood education for sustainability and their experiences with their supervising teacher during their student teaching experience. The student teachers revealed in their

blogs that children frequently took part in different activities planned by the teachers and participated infrequently in activities planned among the children. The blogs indicated differing perspectives on how exactly sustainability is defined in early-childhood education between the student teachers and the supervising teachers. The student teachers defined sustainability with a whole-institution approach to include environmental issues such as recycling and consumption as well as social and cultural issues. The student teachers wrote in their blogs that the supervising teachers tended to view sustainability in parts by focusing on the environmental issues and not the cultural issues (p. 423).

Ernst and Tornabene (2012) surveyed 110 early-childhood education students from a Minnesota university using a series of 16 photographs. The participants were first asked to identify the photos of places they would most like and least like to visit. The participants were then asked to identify photos that showed spaces most and least conducive to meeting educational outcomes. The participants were then asked open-ended questions about natural outdoor environments, and their motivation or barrier to use natural outdoor spaces. The three most conducive photos selected were:

- 1) Playground;
- 2) Pavilion in open woods; and,
- 3) Lakeside shoreline.

The three least conducive photos selected depicted:

- 1) Open forest with no path;
- 2) Open unmowed grassy area; and,
- 3) Stream in wooded area with a narrow foot path (pp. 652-653).

Researchers found that participants equated structured environments with better learning outcomes as opposed to those resulting from more open areas.

Glackin (2016) concluded after studying secondary school teachers that those who were successful in teaching outdoors tended to value authentic science opportunities and those who were less successful viewed the outdoors for the novelty of the experience and focused on maintaining control of the students when in a space without walls. Torquati, Cutler, Gilkerson, and Sarver (2013) surveyed early-childhood education majors and professionals working in the classroom and found that early-childhood educators rated nature and science as the least important in terms of experiences and learning outcomes. Language and literacy acquisition were rated first. Participating teachers indicated their confidence level for language and literacy acquisition as first and for nature and science as last. Teachers did acknowledge the importance of outdoor play, observing seasonal changes, and interacting with animals and plants.

In their research on parents' reactions to outdoor classrooms, Hunter et al. (2019) interviewed parents, teachers, and children before and after an outdoor renovation from traditional playground to outdoor classroom. Although the teachers were consistent in their practice of using the outdoor space as opportunities for child-led exploration, tension began to grow between the parents and teachers as parents believed that more structured learning and less child-led exploration should take place in their outdoor spaces (p.38). Despite Dewey's (1916) admonition that "it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and significant as possible", research on outdoor and nature-based early-childhood education remains contradictory (p.56).

## **Significant Life Experiences**

Altan and Lane (2018) said, “Imagine that your life has been a journey from birth until today. Talk about your life experiences at home, school, or as a learner during this life journey which had an impact on or contributed to your ways of thinking” (p. 241). They presented this prompt to five female teachers from Turkey during an initial interview of significant life experiences (SLEs). They then explored which of the life experiences the teachers would identify as ‘significant’ and discussed with the teacher’s the relationship or contribution of their narratives and their dispositions. In the final interview, the researchers questioned the teachers on how their SLEs contributed to their teaching. The researchers reported that the participating teachers identified travel as a noteworthy experience and influenced their teaching practices by enhancing their communication style with children from all cultures (p. 245). This study will also focus on teachers’ reported SLEs to investigate whether these experiences have influenced their teaching practices.

Using narrative inquiry, Williams and Chawla (2016) interviewed 18 participants who had attended nature-based environmental programs between 4 and 40 years ago when they were 5 to 15-year-old children. The purpose of the study was to identify memories that were still important to the participants. The interviewers began by asking each participant the year they participated and any specific programs they remembered. This question was followed by open-ended questions asking the participants for more details and their experiences in the program(s). All participants recalled their time in the program to include many hands-on opportunities which ultimately led to a greater awareness of the natural world as adults.

Similarly, Liddicoat and Krasny (2014) explored the autobiographic episodic memories of 54 youth who had attended a residential environmental program five years prior. Using

semi-structured interviews, their findings indicated that many participants remembered scientific information they had learned during the program and continued to use what they learned to understand their local environment.

In a study of reported SLEs from 23 public park-goers, Asah et al. (2018) asked entrants to a city park whether they had participated in nature-based activities as a child. Although the participants were not necessarily avid environmentalists, they were choosing to spend time in a natural environment (i.e., city park). If the participant responded ‘yes’, the individual was then asked to “describe the pathways for this participation”. Their life experiences were categorized into activities of self-exploration, exploring with other individuals, or explorations as part of a school, after-school, or organizational (e.g., Scouts) activity. Park goers who responded that they had not participated in nature-based activities as children were not further interviewed.

Li and Chen (2015) surveyed 34 environmentally active Chinese college students about their significant life experiences. The most frequently mentioned life experiences occurred when the students were younger than seven-years-old and involved either natural experiences or participation in environmental organizations. The researchers then used these survey responses to develop a scale that they administered to 606 college students who were either biology, environmental sciences, or economics majors to determine their environmental commitment. They discovered that the students’ level of environmental action was influenced by their ‘life principles’ or their sense of social responsibility.

Most studies of SLE have involved participants who are adults. In a rare study of SLEs research involving participants who were not adults, Stevenson et al. (2014) used a multiple-choice survey instrument with students in sixth and eighth grades at North Carolina schools.

The survey measured the students' environmental knowledge and their environmental behavior. The results indicated that having a role model experienced in the outdoors was an influence on student environmental behavior (p. 168). McClintic and Petty (2015) specifically targeted their study to the outdoor play memories of early-childhood educators. They interviewed 10 early-childhood educators and the center director from a traditional preschool program located in an urban area about their childhood memories of outdoor play. Although the respondents did not provide specific autobiographical memories, their responses were consistent and concluded that the teachers believed they learned the most when allowed to explore on their own and use their imaginations (p. 38).

Using a phenomenological approach, Jorgenson (2013) interviewed three primary school teachers to investigate their acceptance and utilization of a school garden. The teachers were purposefully selected because of their use of the school garden. The teachers were interviewed twice; the first time to hear their life history regarding family, education, and the outdoors, and the intent of the second interview was to obtain their perspectives on teaching. Following coding the information obtained from the interviews into categories or concepts, such as nostalgia, he concluded that the teachers drew their practices around the school garden from their environmental memories, their observations of children's behavior, and their beliefs about teaching and learning.

### **Summary**

This chapter described studies that used significant life experience as a basis for determining study participants future environmental actions and activities. Consistently, the more memories individuals reported of outdoor experiences either through self-exploration, accompanied by a role model, or as an organized experience such as Scouting, the more likely the

individuals were to want to protect the environment. Paradoxically though, teachers were not as open toward adjusting their teaching practices toward exploration in an outdoor area, choosing instead to use the outdoors for free play and the indoor setting for academics.

### Chapter 3. Method

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the significant life experiences (SLEs) of early-childhood educators from traditional preschool programs and from nature-based programs to determine whether these experiences influenced the educators' current teaching practices and whether the experiences differed between the teachers from each learning environment. The following research questions guided this study.

- What significant life experiences do early-childhood educators report as having contributed to their teaching practice?
- Do reported significant life experiences differ for educators in NBE programs and those in traditional pre-K programs?

#### Design

To address the research questions, this qualitative study took a phenomenological approach. "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (van Manen, 2016, pp. 8-9). The SLEs reported by participants are not expected to be unique but common everyday experiences that for whatever reason remain vivid in the minds of the narrators. Phenomenological research is "not experimental, comparative, or correlational" (Vagle, 2018, p. 86). Each interview is an opportunity to learn something new about the phenomena of interest.

Prior to collecting reports from participants, I solicited the assistance of three NBE and three traditional teachers who were known to me for a pilot test of my interview questions, the order of the questions, and my proposed coding method. My intent was to ensure that both the NBE and traditional teachers could easily answer the questions. None of the pilot participants knew the questions in advance. I did not change the order or wording of any of the questions

following the pilot test but did change my coding method from process coding to initial coding. I anticipated that participants would use “-ing” words and discovered that was not the case.

Following the pilot study, I collected reports of SLEs from two purposely selected organizations of early-childhood educators; one sample from traditional pre-K programs and the other from nature-based programs. The individual educators from each organization were a convenience sample of those who responded to the solicitation. Patton (2001) defined convenience sampling as “easy in terms of time, money, and effort” (p. 244). Using a more rigorous sampling method than convenience sampling is a limitation of this study. I then categorized their reports of experiences into themes, and compared themes found in data from NBE teachers to themes found in data from traditional-program teachers. Since this was a convenience sample, I did not attempt to ensure proportionate representation of each organization.

## **Procedure**

To obtain the perspective of early-childhood educators who currently teach in a nature-based or forest school, compared with perspectives of early-childhood educators who teach in a traditional-program, I solicited participants from two different voluntary membership organization. Some invited participants could be members of both membership groups whose total membership is approximately 65,000. The Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS) is a voluntary organization for educators who teach or are administrators in forest and nature schools along the east coast of the U.S. There are 17 state chapters with the home office in Baltimore, Maryland. Besides quarterly emailed newsletters, the organization offers on-site trainings, workshops, conferences, and certifications in nature-based education. The founder of the organization agreed to post a request for participants in an online newsletter. Participant interviews occurred via the Zoom electronic meeting venue.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) was the organization selected for participants from traditional pre-K programs. This is a voluntary membership organization of approximately 60,000 early-childhood educators throughout the nation and also serves as an accrediting agency for early-childhood programs. Similar to ERAFANS, NAEYC offers its membership training and networking opportunities, as well as online and published resources, and discussion forums for special interests. Participants were solicited via a pre-approved post on a discussion forum. Institutional approvals, solicitation messages, and informed-consent forms are in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection**

Upon receipt of approvals and consent, I arranged interviews via the Zoom electronic saving the recordings on the UWSP server. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed through the Zoom transcription service, followed by a second reading by me to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Each interview lasted between 20 minutes to an hour and a half. To ensure discretion, I assigned each participant a pseudonym in NVivo. I sought participants who were currently teaching full-time in a traditional or NBE pre-K program and those who had been teaching at least two years. The first two questions in the protocol (Appendix B) were used to screen out potential participants who are part-time, either as classroom teachers or as directors. When a potential participant expressed interest via email, I responded via email and asked the screening questions. Because pre-K programs have operated differently since the pandemic, I instituted the requirement for at least two years of experience to obtain reports of SLEs from participants who could describe their programs both prior to and since the pandemic. Potential participants who were full-time teachers for at least two years were scheduled for an interview and asked the remaining interview items (Appendix B). The interview questions were inspired

by the research of McClintic and Petty (2015) and Jorgensen (2013) who both began their interviews of NBE educators only by soliciting information on education and employment. To be inclusive of the teachers from traditional pre-K programs, I expanded on their questions to include teaching practices generally rather than limiting it to teaching practices in the outdoors. Throughout interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions to give them the opportunity to clarify or expand on their initial response.

### **Data Analyses**

After interviews were transcribed and participants checked their transcripts, I used a first-cycle coding method that Saldaña (2014) referred to as initial coding. The advantage of initial coding was that it allowed me to remain open to the content and not begin with any preconceived ideas of themes. The following transcription and codes are from my pilot study of initial coding of one response by a nature-based educator.

So, I grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania and my parents had 64 acres and most of it was woods with a stream and we cut wood in the winter and spent a lot of time outdoors because we obviously were away from city life<sup>1</sup> and couldn't just walk to our friends' houses so my sister and I and my dog would just go out in the woods and, you know, do stuff out there and I really enjoyed it. My sister didn't really get into it so much but I found pleasure in that<sup>2</sup>. My dad was an engineer and mom was a stay-at-home mom and I thought I would get into something more engineering but I did some summer jobs at a golf course and worked for a landscape company and I really enjoyed that<sup>3</sup>. It's just what brings me joy<sup>4</sup>. I really enjoy the connection with nature and sharing that with others<sup>5</sup>.

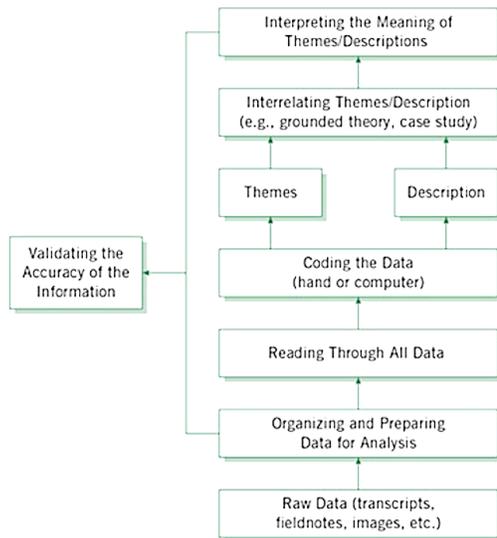
Legend:

- 1 – isolated childhood
- 2 – pleasure in being outside
- 3 – happiness with jobs that were outdoors
- 4 – joy in outdoor activity
- 5 - sharing nature-connectedness with others

In the example above, Codes 2 and 4 share a conceptually similar theme and to some extent code 3 also repeats this theme in saying that joy was found in being outside.

Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 194) wrote of qualitative data analysis as occurring in sequential steps and depicted these steps as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Data Analysis



Transcribing the interviews and verifying the content of the interview was the major focus of the first step of organizing and preparing the data for analysis. This included contacting the participants again to ask them to member check their responses. Although a video was not necessary, all participants with one exception agreed to both a video and audio recording. One participant requested that the video feature not be used. In my pilot study, I noticed that narrators started to respond and then wanted to start again. I also noticed that there were lengthy

sentences, and the use of “um” and “ah”. I transcribed the recordings for clarity and not verbatim.

The second step that Creswell and Creswell (2018) described was an overall holistic look at the data weighing in the tone and noting an impression of what the participant reported. I used a dedicated computer-assisted qualitative-data-analysis software (CAQDAS) tool; the student version of NVivo.

Coding the data is the third step (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used initial coding as I did with my pilot study. During my second phase of coding or step four, I coded all participants’ repeated statements, phrases, or images to generate descriptions and themes. I also coded the sentiment of the statement or phrase. For example, some participants reported that they were discouraged by family members in pursuing a career in education. I was able to code the sentiment of these responses as negative. During the final step, I began to summarize the themes across participants from each group to compose my own narrative of what these reports represent.

### **Trustworthiness**

To control for my bias and to ensure inter-coder agreement, a random sample of data (25%) was coded a second time by an independent second researcher who is a current elementary public school teacher with 20 years of experience in the classroom. A reliability score of less than 80% on the sample would lead to a thorough test of all data. The inter-coder agreement for coding the responses to the teachers’ primary educational goals for children was 88%, 86% for coding their early experiences, and 85% for coding the influences on teaching practices. Response bias was controlled by member checking and a comparison of a sample of the audio files with the written transcript by an independent second researcher.

## **Summary**

In this phenomenological and qualitative study, I collected reports of significant life experiences from two samples of participating early-childhood educators employed in two different settings: first, in traditional classrooms with structured playgrounds, and second, in outdoor areas that are main classrooms with limited indoor classroom spaces. I analyzed data about background experiences and influences that drew each educator to either the traditional or nature-based learning environment and to their specific teaching practices.

## Chapter 4. Findings

In this chapter I describe recruitment for this study of nature-based educators and traditional pre-K educators. I then present participants' reports on influences of their families on their significant life experiences and career choices. In the next three sections, I present themes and sub-themes that emerged from my analyses and show selected instances of them.

### Participants

Nineteen people responded to the recruitment solicitation from ERAFANS. Ten of the 19 potential participants were interviewed. Two of the 19 respondents were not interviewed because they were recent graduates and had not yet secured a nature-based position. The remaining seven were contacted for an interview but subsequently did not proceed due to scheduling conflicts, personal commitments, or eventually the saturation point had been reached.

Fourteen potential participants responded to the recruitment solicitation from the NAEYC. Ten of the fourteen potential participants were interviewed. Of the four potential participants not included in these analyses, one was a director of a preschool program and not directly working with children, one was teaching in China, one was a recent graduate, and one did not proceed due to personal commitments. The resulting sample comprised ten nature-based educators and ten traditional pre-K educators. Of the ten nature-based educators; eight were White females, one was a non-White female, and one was a White male. All of the traditional pre-K educators were White females. NAEYC reported its membership as 80% White, 97% female, and 52% older than 50 (Allvin, 2016). Comparable membership data were not collected by ERAFANS.

The next sections provide background information on participants' educational levels, family influences on their career choices, and their primary educational goals for children. I

used the acronym NBE for participants from the nature-based sample and TRAD for participants from the traditional pre-K sample when referring to them collectively. When an individual participant is quoted, a pseudonym is used followed by the acronym NBE or TRAD to indicate their sample. NBE participants and TRAD participants attained similar highest degrees. The highest degree attained for the TRAD participants was one participant held an associate degree, four reported holding bachelor's degrees, four held master's degrees, and one earned a doctorate. TRAD participants' undergraduate degrees were in either early-childhood education, child development, or special education, with one exception. That participant held an English undergraduate major, followed by a masters' degree in urban education and a doctorate in educational leadership. The highest degree attained for the NBE participants was one participant held an associate degree, two held bachelors' degrees, six reported masters' degrees, and one held a doctorate. Four of the NBE participants' undergraduate degrees were in either early-childhood education, child development, or elementary education. The remaining six NBE participants reported undergraduate studies on public relations, environmental education, fashion, French, human resources management, or architecture. Four of the six reported having transitioned to early-childhood education from career paths they did not find fulfilling. Natalie (NBE) said that she was "[initially] whole hog into the corporate world" but then referred to her ten years in human resources management as "a little soul-sucking. It was a position where I was doing a lot of firing and laying off and delivering severance packages and it was just crushing. It was horrible." Naomi (NBE) described her early career in fashion as "completely superficial and not really what I wanted to do." Although the educational levels for the samples were essentially equivalent, the career paths for the TRAD participants was more linear and consistent with their educational training than that of the NBE who for six of

the ten was a career path that included a career change from a four-walled office setting to the outdoors.

## **Influences**

The first theme that emerged from my analyses of data was influences of family and teachers on participants' career choices. Seventeen of the 20 participants reportedly came from families where one or both parents were teachers or extended family members were teachers. I found few reports of family expectation or encouragement for participants to become a teacher. In one instance, Teresa (TRAD) said,

Well, I actually was never going to be a teacher because everybody in my family was teachers just about. My father had been a high-school teacher for many, many years. In addition to his teaching, he had two or three other jobs at the same time. It wasn't just a matter of money. It was status and treatment and value and all that sort of stuff.

In another instance, Nan (NBE) shared that her dad and her three uncles were teachers but added

It was not really something that my parents encouraged me to do. They said, 'If you're not going to be a doctor, be a lawyer, and if you're not going to be a lawyer, well, maybe you could be a social worker.' I don't think they said it directly but it was like 'just reach further than that.'

In a third instance, Tilly (TRAD) said that "education was not a priority growing up. I was the oddball even going to college."

Although none of the participants reported that family members directly encouraged them to pursue teaching, the report that the majority of the participants had family members who were teachers may have indirectly influenced their choice of the teaching profession.

Daily interactions with family members, observations, classroom involvement through field trips and conversations about teaching may have contributed to the participants' decision to become teachers.

### **Educational Goals**

In this section are my findings from analyses of data on reported educational goals differing among educators in NBE programs and in traditional pre-K programs. Each participant was asked to identify their primary educational goals for children. Forty-one words and phrases were coded under three themes and six sub-themes. Table 1 shows the frequency of coded responses and instances of response by both groups. Because responses could be coded under more than sub-theme, separate columns refer to frequency of each theme and number of participants whose responses were coded under that sub-theme. Codes are listed in Appendix C.

*Table 1. Coding for Theme: Educational Goals*

Secondary Sub-Theme	Tertiary Sub-Theme	TRAD	<i>n</i>	NBE	<i>n</i>
Soft Skills	Whole child	17	6	25	8
	Social-emotional learning	3	3	17	7
	Growth mindset	4	2	6	4
	Executive-function skills	3	2	17	8
Academics		4	3	8	4
Nature	Connection & compassion	0	0	6	4
	Nature knowledge	0	0	4	3

A secondary sub-theme that I found emergent from coded data was soft skills. A tertiary sub-theme that I found under this sub-theme is whole child, in which data showed that a child has a sense and a security in belonging in a class and, at some point, to a community. Six of the ten TRAD teachers and eight of the ten NBE teachers mentioned words and phrases that

were coded as whole child. For one instance, Nan (NBE) spoke of children learning “in the context of a community where you have relationships with people and that you’re continuing to learn that learning is about growing your relationships.” For another instance, Tina’s (TRAD) goal for children was that they were “able to interact with other people decently like in a humane loving manner.” In a third instance, Neela (NBE) spoke of the importance of the development of the whole child “from spirit, mind, heart, and social interaction. I would love for them to be well-rounded individuals with skills needed for a workplace but education is not only that for them, it should be a way of being in the world with others, peaceful and productive and kind.”

The next tertiary sub-theme under soft skills is social-emotional learning that I coded seventeen times by seven of the NBE participants as a goal they had for children and three times by three of the TRAD teachers. In one instance, Nan (NBE) summarized her response by saying that her goals for children “coalesce around social-emotional learning and that the cognitive areas; language and literacy and math are learning but not the goal.” Although this code was not as frequently found in data from TRAD teachers, in one instance, Trisha (TRAD) expressed it as follows:

[I’m] a firm believer in social-emotional learning. We all know that our little guys need and deserve to feel connected, loved, respected, and important every single moment by the staff. If this happens, then these students are ready to be sponges and soak up their learning.

Growth mindset was the next tertiary sub-theme that emerged under soft skills that emerged from codes such as, trying, risk-taking, persistence, and confidence. It was coded four times in data from TRAD participants and six times in data from NBE participants. In one

instance, Nessa (NBE) spoke of hoping to instill in her students the ability “to have something not work and instead of giving up on it continue to think it through.”

Executive-function skills was the next tertiary sub-theme that emerged under soft skills. In one instance, Natalie (NBE) said that it was the “biggest set of goals I have for my kids along with just being able to be outside away”. In a second instance, data from Thea (TRAD) was coded as evidence of executive-function skills in saying that her goal for children was “to be inquisitive and curious.”

The second sub-theme was academics. I found it was notably absent in coded data from the majority of participants. Four of the NBE and three of the TRAD participants stated specific academic goals such as letter or number recognition. None of the participants mentioned readiness preparation for kindergarten. In one instance, Tilly (TRAD) said, “It’s always seeing where the child is at and trying to get the child to that next point, that next milestone, whatever it is. I guess my outcome for children is continuous progression.” In another instance, Nikki (NBE) said,

My priority for them is to wonder and for them to learn how to find answers. It’s one of my favorite things to do when a kid asks me a question assuming I know the answer and I get to say, ‘I have no idea. We’re going to have to look it up together. What do you think? Let’s figure it out. Let’s make some guesses.’ I want them to stay passionately curious about the world around them. I think that will play into their academics.

The third sub-theme that emerged from interview data was nature. In a tertiary sub-theme, I found evidence of nature connection and compassion, and another tertiary sub-theme on nature knowledge. I coded no data from any of the ten TRAD participants, but did code data from three of the ten NBE participants. They stated that they wanted their students to gain

skills in plant, insect, and animal identification. In one instance, Nessa (NBE) stated that her students would “learn to identify some trees and get excited and learn something about birds or insects or edible plants, native and non-native species.” In another instance, Natalie (NBE) described a “big goal for all of my kids, to know what poison ivy is, know what you can eat, know what mint looks like, know how earthworms work, know what a grasshopper looks like, that kind of stuff.”

Four of the ten NBE participants spoke of hoping to instill in their students a connection to nature. In one instance, Nan (NBE) spoke of wanting her students to “have a sense of the earth under their feet and a sense of themselves being connected to that.” In another instance, Natalie (NBE) referred to “nature intelligence as the ability to be outside and not get hurt by the outside, knowing how to be with everything that’s outside in a safe way.”

Pre-K by its very definition is the period of educational time before children enter the more formal public or private K-12 school system. I view it as a time to prepare children with the social and academic skills needed for success in kindergarten. The participants I interviewed echoed my views by emphasizing soft skills as a primary educational goal and to a lesser degree, academics.

### **Significant Life Experiences**

In this section are my findings from analyses of data in addressing the following research question: What significant life experiences do early-childhood educators report as having contributed to their teaching practices? Twenty-six words and phrases were coded under four emergent themes. Table 2 shows frequency of coded responses and instances of response by both groups. Because participants’ responses could be coded under more than sub-theme,

separate columns refer to frequency of each theme and number of participants whose responses were coded under that sub-theme. Codes are listed in Appendix C.

*Table 2. Coding for Theme: Significant Life Experiences*

Sub-Theme	TRAD	<i>n</i>	NBE	<i>n</i>
Outdoor Experiences	0	0	48	8
Role Models	12	9	11	6
Books	3	3	0	0
Nature Compassion/Connection	0	0	3	1

Under the sub-theme of outdoor experiences, eight of the ten NBE participants reported 48 significant life experiences. Three of the ten NBE participants had fond memories of family camping trips. Nikki (NBE) shared that

We camped every summer when I was a kid! I can very easily attribute my passion for the outdoors to my summer spent on the Cape in Truro, sleeping in a tent, rain or shine, eating breakfast under a canopy.

Nessa (NBE) remembered her summers in West Virginia as a time when “we went around to different state parks and went camping. Camping with my family was definitely a formative experience. I loved it.” Nellie (NBE), on the other hand, shared many early memories of outdoor experiences like biking and picnicking but said that her family never camped. “My father had been in World War II and had been in the Philippines and just had a really bad experience I think out in the jungles, and he just would never go camping, but we would go and have picnics.”

Three of the ten NBE participants spoke of being a part of the Girl Scouts or another organized nature camp. Nadia (NBE) spoke of taking part in activities like “learning how to make fire and collecting sassafras for sassafras tea, collecting clay from stream banks and throwing that into pottery. We learned weaving and basket-making and whittling and panning

for gold.” Nikki (NBE) was less enthused about her scouting experience “finding it very boring” but acknowledging “Scouts have come a long way since I was a kid.”

Although Nikki’s (NBE) scouting experience did not meet her expectations, she spoke of the connection she had to nature from an early age. “My mom and I joke about me remembering when I first realized that paper came from trees. I was bringing home juice boxes because I couldn’t bear to throw them away because the paper came from trees and I couldn’t just throw away this thing from a tree. I wanted to find a way to give it back to the tree and I had this guilt about using this paper.”

Under the sub-theme of outdoor experiences participants reported solitary activities such as “walking home from the bus and checking what slugs were under the rocks or whether there would be a salamander” (Nikki, NBE), and activities with other children and family members like “making haystacks and climbing anything that we could” (Natalie, NBE).

Under the sub-theme of experiences with role models, six of ten NBE participants shared experiences with role models. Nigel (NBE) shared stories of teachers who were memorable influences in his life. “Every once in a while, I would have a teacher that I kind of identified with, who I felt understood me.” Others spoke of experiences with parents and grandparents. Natalie (NBE) spoke of her science teacher dad as “the guy who always corralled whatever kids were around to go look for snakes. Now I’m terrified of snakes but I so wanted to please him and have that experience with him that I was willing to do that.”

Nine of the ten TRAD participants spoke of early experiences with role models such as family members and teachers. Tracy (TRAD) and Thea (TRAD) spoke of “loving their kindergarten teacher.” Tori (TRAD) spoke of growing up with parents who were in the theater and being “able to laugh and play and be present growing up out on the streets of New York

City.” Early experiences with books were reported by three TRAD participants; all three reported childhood books they still kept as treasures.

### Teaching Practice

In this section are my findings from analyses of data in addressing the second research question, as follows: Do reported significant life experiences differ for educators in NBE programs and those in traditional pre-K programs? When asked if their SLEs impacted their teaching practice, all NBE participants emphatically said that they did. Table 3 shows frequency of coded responses and instances of response by both groups. Codes are listed in Appendix C.

*Table 3. Coding for Theme: SLE Influences on Teaching Practice*

Sub-Theme	TRAD	<i>n</i>	NBE	<i>n</i>
Mirroring	2	2	22	8
Family influence	0	0	11	6
Role models	7	6	0	0
Intrinsic motivation	6	4	16	5
Extrinsic motivation	1	1	0	0
No influence	1	1	0	0

One of the sub-themes that emerged from the data was what I called ‘mirroring,’ meaning copying those play habits practiced as a child into their teaching practices now. Nessa (NBE) responded, “Oh yeah, absolutely. I think an important question for anybody who’s working with kids outside is to think back about how you played as a child. The kids love small world play which is what I did a lot of as a child. I like edible plants so we did that this week and it’s something that’s super engaging to kids.” Nellie (NBE) said, “I believe those experiences of just spending hours building dams on a creek were, yes, they impacted the way I teach because I get the value of that. I get that you’re learning about water and you’re learning about flow and you’re learning about building, but the inner calm that it gives you as a human being to not be directed at everything you do.”

A second sub-theme, family influence, also emerged from NBE participants' responses. Naomi (NBE) responded, "I think my whole upbringing influenced by teaching practices. We were a very 'I'm the parent, you're the child' kind of family. From that I always really wanted a respect for children to be given. I never really understood just because I was younger why my voice wouldn't matter. So, as an educator I really strive to make sure that the children are respected and that their voices are heard. I really think it's important for them to understand that they are valued as people even though they're children." "My dad was one of those sort of a taskmaster but not. He didn't understand. How many times he said to me 'the shortest distance between two points is a straight line and you just zigzag.' When another teacher or adult or parent says something to a kid, I know exactly how that's being taken" (Nigel, NBE).

The influence of SLEs on the teaching practice of TRAD educators was not as apparent as it was with the NBE. A third sub-theme that I found was role models, especially teachers, who impacted the later teaching practices of TRAD teachers Teresa (TRAD), Tracy (TRAD), and Tammy (TRAD) spoke of remembering teachers who encouraged and inspired them.

I found a fourth sub-theme of intrinsic motivation in data from TRAD participants. That is, those participants who couldn't explain when or why but always knew they would teach. Tracy (TRAD) spoke of "sharing their joy" during "light-bulb moments when children learn something." Thea (TRAD) spoke of her students as "brilliant creatures who primarily learn through play. I've witnessed it my entire life."

A fifth sub-theme, extrinsic motivation, emerged from the responses of Trisha (TRAD). Although Trisha (TRAD) talked of an experience as a child witnessing young children in a neglectful home benefiting from attending an early-childhood education program, her own

specific memory was that of realizing that early-childhood education was an opportunity to “get a job just about anywhere.”

Paradoxically, Trisha (TRAD) also responded that her “teaching practice wasn’t influenced by her early experiences” which I coded as a sixth-sub-theme.

### **Summary**

Four themes and seventeen secondary or tertiary sub-themes emerged from my analyses, I found many differences in data from NBE and TRAD participants in their reported paths to become early-childhood educators. The most dominant theme that emerged from my analyses of data from both groups was that of family influence. With one exception, 19 of the 20 participants indicated that their early experiences influenced their teaching practices. The NBE participants’ descriptions of that influence were more detailed and tended to relay specific incidents as compared to the TRAD participants, who reported a greater influence of teachers.

## **Chapter 5. Conclusions & Recommendations**

My purpose in this study was to explore self-reported effects of significant life experiences of teachers from both NBE programs and from traditional pre-K programs, and to investigate whether these self-reported experiences influenced teachers' actions and practices in the classroom. The following research questions formed the basis for the semi-structured interviews I conducted with ten members of NAEYC and ten members of ERAFANS.

- What significant life experiences do early-childhood educators report as having contributed to their teaching practices?
- Do reported significant life experiences differ for educators in NBE programs and those in traditional pre-K programs?

Among my findings, I had expected to hear stories of role models and family members, of travel, and of books. These findings fulfilled that expectation but added some unexpected findings. One such unexpected finding was the participants reports on family members who were teachers, elementary grade teachers and for three of the ten TRAD participants; the memorable influence of their kindergarten teachers. I also did not expect to discover the importance that eight of the ten NBE participants attributed to mirroring their childhood play in their current teaching practices.

### **Discussion**

Dewey (1916) wrote “when we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it” (p.139). That belief resonated in the reports from the NBE participants who continue to share and relive their early experiences with their students in the hopes that they will remember the importance of these outdoor experiences as adults. What of the experiences of the

TRAD participants? The experiences reported by the TRAD participants were ascribed to role models, especially their teachers. The impact of such role models affected the teaching practices of the TRAD participants more than they did the practices of their NBE counterparts. This finding has implications for SLE research and the field of ECE in general. First, the field of SLE research should expand beyond that of environmental education to other majors in education to obtain a broader picture of the importance of SLEs. Secondly, there is need for teacher preparation programs to acknowledge the role of the educator's caregiving environment. Such acknowledgment can be prioritized and documented as part of the Program's Dispositions and Policy.

### **Conclusions**

The following sub-sections describe three kinds of conclusions: direct, indirect, and tangential. As expected in the course of 20-minute to 90-minute interviews, participants brought up some topics that were only tangentially related to the questions I asked. Some of those topics focused on compensation, on licensing, and on equity. Some of the responses lead to indirect conclusions. I defined indirect conclusions as those conclusions from interview question responses that were asked to gain an insight to the participants' upbringing, educational background, and career trajectory. In comparison to the tangential conclusions, the indirect conclusions were more individual. For example, one participant spoke of being "tinker-garden" certified, and I asked her to explain what that entailed. Another spoke of operating a "nomadic program" and I asked her to elaborate on that as well. I will discuss in this chapter the direct conclusions that address the research questions, the indirect conclusions, and the tangential conclusions.

### ***Direct Conclusions***

The first research question on whether SLEs from NBE and from TRAD would differ, from the teachers I interviewed, was answered. They did differ. The SLEs mentioned by the NBE tended to involve outdoor activities sometimes solitary and sometimes with other people or groups such as the Scouts. The activity tended to be the focus of the story although sometimes a significant family member was involved. The SLEs mentioned by the TRAD tended to put a role model such as a family member in the center of the experience. The experiences were not necessarily outside and oftentimes did not involve an activity but simply a memory of the family member or role model.

A striking finding was the difference in the influence of these SLEs on their teaching practices. The NBE were prone to ‘mirroring’ the activities they did as children, sometimes activities they shared with family members, in their teaching practices. Several of the NBE referred to themselves as not being ‘big adventure’ people but more ‘small world’ people preferring to create small villages with twigs, grasses, and bark, and most importantly to play as they did as children. Nadia (NBE) spoke of her early experiences at a nature camp that included a “large group gathering at the beginning and then also at the end there was always a closing circle. That is something that I still try to replicate.” In comparison, the TRAD were influenced by the practices of their early teachers. Motivation among the TRAD participants was frequently altruistic as they indicated knowing they wanted to work with children.

### ***Indirect Conclusions***

My goal with each interview was to establish an initial rapport so that participants felt comfortable responding. I found that starting each interview with a discussion on their career path or trajectory was a successful “icebreaker”. A common response was “how long do you

have?” before they would delve into their backgrounds. Overall, the responses to this question were the lengthiest but beneficial in terms of learning more about each participant. Because participants’ frequently mentioned their parents and other family members when talking about their career path, a second indirect question was whether there was a history of family members as teachers.

When detailing the chronology of their career paths, their educational paths always entered the discussion. An indirect finding in this study was the difference in the educational backgrounds of the NBE and TRAD educators. The TRAD teachers had a laser-focus from their undergraduate years toward a career in education, especially early-childhood education, motivated for some by their beloved kindergarten teachers and by the family members who, for some, discouraged them from a career in teaching. The NBE teachers often took a more circuitous route to nature-based early-childhood education with more than one NBE teacher stating that they didn’t know that a job existed that allowed them to combine their love for the outdoors with a passion to work with young children.

### ***Tangential Conclusions***

Some responses were not the result of a direct question but came up frequently in the course of the interviews. Many of the teachers repeated what Nessa (NBE) said, “I’m privileged enough to have a husband who is the primary earner, has benefits, and has been teaching for a long time. If I were a single parent, I couldn’t afford to take this kind of job or if I were the primary breadwinner, it would be very hard.” Whether employed in a traditional pre-K or a nature-based setting, the common belief among the early-childhood educators interviewed was that they were not compensated at a rate equivalent to a traditional public school

kindergarten teacher. As Nikki (NBE) said, “I did not want to live with my mom forever and working as an assistant preschool teacher was not going to get me out of my mom’s house.”

## **Recommendations**

Nessa (NBE) said, “We have this fairy tale fear of the woods and that gets into the whole other element of risk and comfort level with risk, and how good this kind of play is for kids in terms of taking risks, of coming up against their fear and moving past it.” Her reference to a fairy tale fear of the woods is a metaphor for the fear that some policy makers, stakeholders, and families hold about nature-based education. This section discusses recommendations for “moving past the fear”. The first recommendation is directed at institutes of higher education who can influence early-childhood education teacher preparation programs. The second recommendation is focused on the need for professional organizations in the field of education to acknowledge and legitimize the benefits of nature-based education. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the major organization for early-childhood educators has begun the initiative to acknowledge the significance of nature-based education. It behooves other stakeholders such as families of young children, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and child-care policy makers to recognize and advocate for nature-based programs. The third recommendation enjoins State Licensing and Accreditation agencies to recognize and establish licensing policies for nature-based programs. Through research collaborations and advocacy efforts, the quality of learning that take place in these nature-based programs can be weighed against the perceived risks engendered from “fairy tale fear of the woods”. Further research is needed to weigh the benefits of nature-based programs versus the perceived risks that are not part of a four-walled program.

### ***Teacher Preparation***

Nessa (NBE) said, “My mother sees what I’m doing now and she says, ‘You would have loved that as a child.’ True, I would and I still do so I still get to do it.” I don’t know whether the NBE teachers I interviewed would have pursued early-childhood education undergraduate degrees with an emphasis on nature-based education if such a degree had been available. I did find that many found themselves initially pursuing a career they did not find fulfilling unaware that nature-based education could be a career which was not true of the traditional educators whom I interviewed. A recommendation from this study is that as teacher preparation programs discuss different philosophies and foundations of education such as Montessori or Reggio Emilia, to include nature-based education as an option. Keeping in mind that not all pre-K programs are the same and not all are a good fit for all children, not all pre-K models are a good fit for all prospective teachers.

### ***Benefits of Nature-Based Education***

During the pandemic, NBE programs for many families became the only child-care alternative because many traditional programs were closed, only open to children of essential workers, or open at reduced capacity. The early-childhood community needs to broaden the perspective of viewing NBE as an option when there is no other option and need to recognize it for the benefits it provides children. Much has been written about the calming influence of time in nature for both adults and children and, while beneficial, there are other benefits to NBE. NBE provides children the opportunity to explore and to be guided by an ever-increasing number of professionals trained in nature-based education. It provides children the opportunity to experiment with outdoor materials to build forts and boats, to find a “sit spot” that allows them to watch what’s going on around them without interruption, and to grow into their roles

as 21<sup>st</sup> century stewards. It allows them to cooperate with others, take risks, and learn to persevere; all qualities integral to success in school and life.

### *Licensing*

Just as holding a valid driver's license does not ensure that a driver is a good driver, the inability to pass a driving test and obtain a driver's license sends a message that this individual does not have the knowledge and skills to be a good driver. Not all nature-based programs want the scrutiny and regulations that are part of holding a child-care license but the inability to pass the licensing criteria because of not having four-walls, for example, is one requirement that could be adapted to be more inclusive of nature-based programs. In the state of Maryland, licensing outdoor preschools has met with resistance from a staffing issue. Those tasked with monitoring traditional pre-K programs are not trained to validate nature-based programs because protocols do not exist. Similar to other states with the exception of Washington, there is also a reluctance to make these accommodations when so few programs exist in each state. The Natural Start Alliance (2020) estimated that between 10 and 20 nature-based programs exist in Maryland. I contend though that if the current growth rate continues, there will be 20 to 40 by the year 2023 and over a thousand programs nationally, all operating with varying interpretations of emergency and safety protocols. The conversation between licensing agencies and nature-based programs to begin to bring nature-based programming under the umbrella of legitimate pre-K programming needs to begin.

Navigating the obstacles of obtaining program insurance, publicizing one's nature-based program without drawing too much attention from licensing and accreditation agencies, and operating within the constraints of state regulations were a challenge to the NBE teachers. A challenge that was met with innovative solutions. Naomi (NBE) recently contacted me to

update me on her program. She indicated that she was unable to operate her nature school under any “proper regulations” and was exploring whether her program could be considered a church. Others like Nellie (NBE) operate nomadic programs with parents dropping their children off at different parks and wooded areas, pre-arranged in advance; never establishing a fixed space. Others refer to their programs as camps. Still others limited their operating hours and days of operation so as not to be considered a pre-K program.

At this time, only the state of Washington licensed outdoor pre-K programs. The benefits of licensure are assurances that the staff are up-to-date on training, the facility has undergone periodic inspections, the program has been reviewed, and the program is eligible for subsidies to enroll students whose families would not necessarily be able to afford that particular program. The latter benefit, availability of subsidies, has equity implications. As Natural Start Alliance (2020) reported, most children participating in nature-based preschools are White. Because of the lack of availability to subsidies, nature-based programs are limited to families who do not need financial assistance to attend resulting in as some of the participants noted, programs for the affluent, not necessarily for those who would most benefit from this type of program.

### ***Future Research***

Although I did not specifically ask any of the participants’ ages, many volunteered or provided enough detail about their career paths that I could make an estimate. Linking their ages with their stories hinted at an area for future research. The childhood SLE reports from the NBE participants indicated that those who were now older than 45-years-old were likely to hear “don’t come home until the streetlights come on” with little restriction on how they spent their time and those now younger than 40-years-old were somewhat less “free range”

engaging in more structured outdoor activities such as camps. With a sample of ten participants, I cannot confirm this potential generational difference and would like my own further research to explore age-related differences in SLEs with nature-based participants.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I drew three kinds of conclusion about evidence from participants, either traditional pre-K teachers or nature-based teachers, who reportedly were influenced by their significant life experiences, and that early experiences reported by traditional pre-K participants differed. I began this research by noting that SLEs were early events that influenced actions in later life (Hacking, Cushing, and Barratt, 2019) and concluded by offering three recommendations for policy makers, families, membership organizations, and for my own future research.

## **Postscript**

Over two years ago, I visited a forest school having little knowledge of nature-based schools other than what I had read in journals and books. My narrative of that visit is included in an author's note at the beginning of my dissertation. My author's note describes the smells, sights, and sounds of a forest school from my perspective as an observer. It became clear to me that my narrative was missing something though. My observations did not dwell on the experiences the children were having and what prompted those experiences. I left that forest site curious about the childhood experiences of the educators I saw that day, certain that they had to be different than mine. Until I started talking with NBE educators and learned their life experiences I came to realize how different those experiences were and how impactful the experiences those children were having that day would be on their adult lives.

## References

- Allvin, R. (2016). Making connections: Affiliates and inclusive membership: Making NAEYC the professional association our members can't live without. *Young Children, 71*(4), 39-45.
- Altan, S., & Lane, J. (2018). Teachers' narratives: A source for exploring the influences of teachers' significant life experiences on their dispositions and teaching practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 74*, 238-248.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.05.012>.
- Arlemalm-Hagser, E. (2017). Student teachers' workplace-based learning in Sweden on early-childhood education for sustainability: Experiences in practice settings. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 49*, 411-427.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-017-0201-9>
- Asah, S., Bengston, D., Westphal, L., & Gowan, C. (2018). Mechanisms of children's exposure to nature: Predicting adulthood environmental citizenship and commitment to nature-based activities. *Environment and Behavior, 50*(7), 807-836.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013915417718021>
- Barfod, K. (2018). Maintaining mastery but feeling professionally isolated: Experienced teachers' perceptions of teaching outside the classroom. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 18*(3), 201-213.
- Bennett, R. (2009, October 6). *Lessons in life at the forest school. London Times.*  
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/education/article1801036.ece>
- Biermeier, M. (2015, November). Inspired by Reggio Emilia: Emergent curriculum in relationship-driven learning environments. *Young Children, 70*(5), 15-25.

- Burke, P. J., & Soffa, S. J. (2018). *The elements of inquiry: Research and methods for a quality dissertation*. Routledge.
- Chawla, L. (2006). Research methods to investigate significant life experiences: Review and recommendations. *Environmental Education Research, 12*(3-4), 359-374.
- Creswell, J. C. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE.
- Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2015). *Designs for living and learning*. Redleaf Press.
- Davis, J. (2007). Climate change and its impact on young children. *Every Child, 13*(4), 6-7.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Simon & Schuster.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. Collier.
- Dewey, J. (1990). *The school and societ & The child and the curriculum* (centennial ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Elkind, D. (2020). The impact of psychological sciences on early-childhood education: Developmental influences. In D. Gullo, & M. Grane (Eds.), *Scientific influences on early-childhood education from diverse perspectives to common practices* (p. 78). Taylor & Francis.
- Ernst, J., & Tornabene, L. (2012). Preservice early-childhood educators' perceptions of outdoor settings as learning environments. *Environmental Education Research, 18*(5), 643-664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2011.640749>
- Glackin, M. (2016). 'Risky fun' or 'authentic science'? How teachers' beliefs influence their practice during a professional development program on outdoor learning. *International Journal of Science Education, 38*(3), 409-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2016.1145368>

- Hacking, E., Barratt, R., & Cushing, D. (2019). Exploring the significant life experiences of childhoodnature. In A. Cutter-Mackenzie, K. Malone, & E. Barratt-Hacking (Eds.), *Research handbook on childhoodnature* (Vol. 42, pp. 1-18). Springer.
- Hunter, J., Syversen, K., Graves, C., & Bodensteiner, A. (2019). Balancing outdoor learning and play: Adult perspectives of teacher roles and practice in an outdoor classroom. *International Journal of Early-childhood Environmental Education*, 7(2), 34-50.
- Jorgenson, S. (2013). The logic of school gardens: A phenomenological study of teacher rationales. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 29(2), 121-135.
- Kuo, M., Barnes, M., & Jordan, C. (2019, February). Do experiences with nature promote learning? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(305), 1-9.
- Li, D., & Chen, J. (2015). Significant life experiences on the formation of environmental action among Chinese college students. *Environmental Education Research*, 21(4), 612-630. <https://doi.org/10.1080.1350462.2014.927830>
- Liddicoat, K., & Krasney, M. (2014). Memories as useful outcomes of residential outdoor environmental education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 45(3), 178-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2014.905431>
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- MacQuarrie, S., Nugent, C., & Warden, C. (2015). Learning with nature and learning from others: Nature as setting and resources for early-childhood education. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 15(1), 1-23.
- Maynard, T., & Waters, J. (2007). Learning in the outdoor environment: A missed opportunity? *Early Years*, 27(3), 255-265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140701594400>

- Maynard, T., Waters, J., & Clement, J. (2013). Moving outdoors: Further explorations of 'child-initiated' learning in the outdoor environment. *Education, 313*(41), 282-299.
- McClintic, S., & Petty, K. (2015). Exploring early-childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about preschool outdoor play: A qualitative study. *Journal of Early-childhood Teacher Education, 36*(1), 24-43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/109001027.2014.997844>
- Natural Start Alliance. (2020). Nature-based preschools in the U.S.: 2020 Snapshot. <https://bit.ly/3Bi3o09>
- Patton, M. (2001). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. SAGE.
- Rivkin, M. (2014). *The great outdoors: Advocating for natural spaces for young children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Saldana, J. (2014). *The coding manual for qualitative research*. SAGE.
- Sobel, D. (2016). *Nature preschools and forest kindergartens: The handbook for outdoor learning*. Redleaf Press.
- Stevenson, K., Peterson, M., Carrier, S., Strnad, R., Bondell, H., Kirby-Hathaway, T., & Moore, S. (2014). Role of significant life experiences in building environmental knowledge and behavior among middle school students. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 45*(3), 163-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2014.901935>
- Torquati, J., Cutler, K., Gilkerson, D., & Sarver, S. (2013). Early-childhood educators' perceptions of nature, science, and environmental education. *Early Education and Development, 24*, 721-743.
- Vagle, M. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experiences*. Routledge.

Williams, C., & Chawla, L. (2016). Environmental identity formation in nonformal environmental education programs. *Environmental Education Research*, 22(7), 978-1001. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2015.1055553>

## Appendix A. Approvals, Solicitations, & Consents

### Institutional Review Board Expedited Protocol Approval

5/11/21

Principal Investigator: Henry St. Maurice

Protocol Number: 2021-06-03-15

Protocol Title: Perceived influences of significant life experiences on early-childhood educators' teaching practices

Protocol Approval Date: 3/15/21

Protocol Expiration Date: 3/14/21

Review Category: Expedited

UWSP FWA: 00017591

Dear Dr St. Maurice:

The above-referenced human-subjects research project has been approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Institutional Review Board (IRB) Committee. This approval is limited to the activities described in the approved protocol, and extends to the performance of these activities at each applicable site identified in the application for IRB review. In accordance with this approval, the specific conditions for the conduct of this research are listed below, and informed consent from subjects must be obtained as indicated. Additional conditions for the general conduct of human-subjects research may be detailed below.

Additional Conditions:

All individuals engaged in human-subjects research are responsible for compliance with all applicable UWSP Research Policies. The Principal Investigator is responsible for assuring all protocol personnel review and adhere to applicable policies for the conduct of human-subjects research.

The IRB maintains an official protocol file for each study to meet the University's regulatory obligations for record keeping. Principal Investigators are responsible for maintaining all records related to the protocol, and are required to share with the IRB. The IRB is not responsible for maintaining study documents for researchers.

Your project approval expiration date is listed above. As a courtesy, approximately 30 and 60 days prior to the expiration of this approval, IRB Administration will notify you via e-mail reminding you to apply for continuing review. It is your responsibility to apply for continuing review and receive continuing approval for the duration of the study. Lapses in approval should be avoided to protect the safety and welfare of enrolled subjects. When you plan to close your study, submit a Protocol Closure Form to [irb@uwsp.edu](mailto:irb@uwsp.edu).

No changes are to be made to the approved protocol or study documents (i.e., consent forms, surveys, etc.) without prior review and approval of the IRB. To modify an existing protocol, complete the Protocol Modification Form and submit to [irb@uwsp.edu](mailto:irb@uwsp.edu).

If there are any injuries, problems, or complaints from participants, you must notify the IRB at [irb@uwsp.edu](mailto:irb@uwsp.edu) within 24 hours. If you have any questions, please contact me. Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

David Barry, Ph.D. IRB Chair



em...@erafans.org

to erafans-educa...@googlegroups.com

Apr 6, 2021, 10:19:07 AM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Hello All!

Lyn Schaefer reached out to ERAFANS to help spread the word of this research study. Please see below for an opportunity to provide valuable insight for a doctoral student! You can contact Lyn at the email listed if you are interested in providing an interview.

*My name is Lyn Schaefer and I am a doctoral student in educational sustainability. I am also a member of ERAFANS. As part of my research study, I am interviewing nature-based educators to determine what influence your early experiences had on your current teaching practices. The interviews will take place in April via Zoom, Teams, or Skype whichever is most comfortable for you. If you would prefer to respond to the interview questions on paper rather than a virtual interview, I can make that possible too. Your participation is completely voluntary and your responses will remain anonymous. If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please contact me at [lsch...@uwsp.edu](mailto:lsch...@uwsp.edu). I thank you in advance for your help.*

In Spring,  
Emily

Emily Woodmansee  
Course Facilitator  
Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS)

## Research Survey Participation Request - "Perceived Influences of Significant Life Experiences on Early Childhood Educators' Teaching Practices."

>  Mary Samour · 13 days ago  
[NAEYC supports research efforts and other initiatives from individuals and outside organizations...](#)

1. Research Survey Participation Request - "Perceived Influences of Significant Life Experiences on Early Childhood Educators' Teaching Practices." 0 Recommend



[Mary Samour](#)

Posted 13 days ago

Reply
Reply Privately

NAEYC supports research efforts and other initiatives from individuals and outside organizations that advance the early childhood profession and the young children it serves. Hello's [Code of Conduct](#) requires that individuals who want to use Hello to disseminate surveys or recruit research/interview subjects need to have these requests approved by NAEYC. These requests should be submitted through [this form](#) and will be considered by NAEYC on a case-by-case basis. If approved, NAEYC will disseminate the research request or informational report through an appropriate NAEYC channel, which might include a NAEYC newsletter, HELLO or an interest forum. Following are approved requests.

My name is Lyn Schaefer and I am a doctoral student in educational sustainability at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. My dissertation is titled "Perceived Influences of Significant Life Experiences on Early Childhood Educators' Teaching Practices." As part of my research study, I am interviewing educators to determine what influence your early experiences had on your current teaching practices. The interview (lasting approximately a half-hour) will take place via Zoom, Teams, or Skype whichever is most comfortable for you. If you would

### Participant Solicitation: ERAFANS

My name is Lyn Schaefer and I am an ERAFANS member. I am also a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point with an interest in early-childhood education. I am conducting research on the inspiration early-childhood educators draw on to incorporate science, sustainability, and environmental education into their teaching. As a member of ERAFANS, I am reaching out to you for your perspective on this topic.

Participation in this research includes participating in an interview to discuss your life experiences that influenced your teaching practices. The interview will take approximately an hour and a half. Your responses will be recorded and will remain anonymous. There will be a follow-up opportunity for you to confirm the accuracy of your interview.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at [lscha273@uwsp.edu](mailto:lscha273@uwsp.edu).

Participant Solicitation: NAEYC Chapter and GapBuster, Inc.

My name is Lyn Schaefer and a member of NAEYC. I am also a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point with an interest in early-childhood education. I am conducting research on the inspiration early-childhood educators draw on to incorporate science, sustainability, and environmental education into their teaching. As a member of NAEYC, I am reaching out to you for your perspective on this topic.

Participation in this research includes participating in an interview to discuss your life experiences that influenced your teaching practices. The interview will take approximately an hour and a half. Your responses will be recorded and will remain anonymous. There will be a follow-up opportunity for you to confirm the accuracy of your interview.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at [lscha273@uwsp.edu](mailto:lscha273@uwsp.edu).

### **Informed Consent Form**

Dr. Henry St. Maurice and Lyn Schaefer would appreciate your participation in a research study designed to determine what influence your early experiences had on your current teaching practices. You are being asked to participate in an interview that should take no more than an hour and a half of your time. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose at any time to opt out of the study. While there may be no immediate benefit to you as a result of your participation in this study, it is hoped that we may gain valuable information about early experiences and later teaching behaviors. A benefit of this study to you is an opportunity to reflect on the impact the experiences you had as a child have had on your instructional practices. We are expecting to interview 10 early-childhood educators for this study.

The information that you provide during the interview will be recorded and you will be assigned a pseudonym. We will not release information that could identify you. All interview transcriptions will be kept in a password protected file on the UWSP server and will not be available to anyone not directly involved in this study. Only anonymous information provided will be retained. All identifiable information will be removed from the study and destroyed or deleted.

Once the study is completed, you may receive the results of the study. Data may be used for secondary research, after all identifiable information has been removed, without additional informed consent required from the participant.

If you would like these results, or if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact:

Lyn Schaefer [Lscha273@uwsp.edu](mailto:Lscha273@uwsp.edu) 301.318.7532

If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study or believe that you have been harmed in some way by your participation, please call or write:

David Barry, PhD

IRB Chair

Associate Professor, Sociology

2100 Main Street. Old Main 208

University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point and Extension

Stevens Point, WI 54481

715.346.3799

[irb@uwsp.edu](mailto:irb@uwsp.edu)

Although Dr. Barry will ask your name, all complaints are kept in confidence.

“I have read and understand the information provided to me; that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time.”

# Approvals

**From:** Monica Wiedel-Lubinski <director@erafans.org>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 22, 2020 11:17 AM  
**To:** Schaefer, Lyn <lscha273@uwsp.edu>  
**Subject:** Re: Research Inquiry

**CAUTION:** This message came from an EXTERNAL source. Do not reply to this message or follow any links in it unless you are certain they are not part of a phishing attack.

---

Dear Lyn,  
Thank you for reaching out. Yes! We would love to support your research efforts. If you have a blurb about the research along with your contact information, we will happily share it in an up-coming newsletter. We are delighted to support good work like yours!

Warmly,  
Monica Wiedel-Lubinski  
Executive Director  
Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS)  
[ERAFANS.org](http://ERAFANS.org) | [it's our nature](http://it's_our_nature)  
[NaturalCommunity.org](http://NaturalCommunity.org)



## **Appendix B. Protocol**

### Screening Questions

1. How long have you been employed at (name of program) and what is your role?
2. Would you describe the program at (name of program)?

### Interview Items

1. Tell me about your educational background. What was the emphasis during your training?
2. Are there any early experiences you can remember that inspired your career choice?
3. Did this experience influence your teaching practices? If so, how?
4. Can you give specific examples of who or how your teaching practices were inspired?
5. What are your primary educational goals for children?
6. How would you describe your teaching practices pre-pandemic?
7. How would you describe your teaching practices during the pandemic?
8. Do you think your teaching practices will change after the pandemic? If so, how?

Note: Questions 6, 7, and 8 were included to collect data for another project.

## Appendix C. Codebook

### Academics

- Milestones
- Continuous progression
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Cognitive areas

### Nature

- Sensory integration
- Nature knowledge/identification
- Compassion
- Nature connection

### Social-emotional: (child's management and expression of emotions; establishing social behaviors)

- Respect
- Feel trusted
- Mindful
- Cooperate with peers
- Cooperative learning
- Passion
- Patience

### Growth Mindset: (the traits that would enable a child to recognize that achievements can happen through effort)

- Try things
- Take risks
- Persist
- Confidence
- Self-esteem

### Executive-function Skills: (traits that would enable a child to develop and carry out a plan despite some setbacks)

- Self-regulation
- Explore
- Curious
- Focus
- Creativity

### Whole Child: (feeling safe, supported, engaged, belonging)

- Feel safe
- Feel valuable
- Moral and ethical
- Contribute to a society
- Interpersonal skills
- Problem-solving
- Part of community
- Divergent thinking
- Sense of themselves as learners

Outdoor Experiences: (any activity outside either done with others or alone with the activity the focus of the story)

- Camping
- Scouts
- Catching crayfish
- Small world play
- Climbing trees
- Making mudpies
- Making fires
- Weaving and basket-making
- Collecting sassafras
- Collecting clay for pottery-making
- Looking for wildlife
- Hiking
- Picnicking
- Picking berries
- Whittling
- Biking
- Playing with hay bales

Role Models: (experience can involve an activity but a person is the focus of the experience)

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Teachers

Employment: (experience involves realization that teaching is a paying profession)

Nature Connection: (experience involves a special place (e.g., sit spot) or activity in nature)

Nature Compassion: (experience involves empathy for nature)

Intrinsic Motivation: (experience involves inner realization about working with children)

Family: (family member is the focus of the influence)

Role Model: (role model other than a family member is the focus of the influence)

Mirroring: (teaching as one played as a child)

Intrinsic motivation: (wanting to impart knowledge; service to others)

Extrinsic motivation: (job security)

No influence