A COLLECTIVE APPROACH TO LEARNING AND TEACHING: AT THE CENTRE OF PARENTAL AND CHILD INVOLVEMENT

by

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Abstract

This study summarizes the Learning Together Program for pre-school children and their caregivers, which is currently implemented in one Whitehorse, Yukon school. The author, who is also the program's teacher, embarks on a phenomenological study of the program through its adult participants. In face to face interviews 11 adults, composed of mothers, fathers and grandparents were asked to comment on eight questions relating to the program and their participation with it. She offers conclusions and recommendations for change and program enhancement arising from her analysis of these interview statements.
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Glossary

Early Childhood Development

An academic field of study that identifies the key aspects of a child’s learning from birth to the age of four. Principles of Early Childhood Development, as identified by Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, (2007), include: physical, social/emotional and language/cognitive domains. The Whitehorse Learning Together Program, like the BC Headstart Program on which it was modeled, is designed to maximize children’s learning opportunities in each of these areas.

First Nations

In Canada, Aboriginal groups, excluding Inuit and Metis, are referred to as First Nations. The comparable term in the US is Native American. First Nations people are officially referred to as “Indians” in the Canadian Indian Act but First Nations has become more commonly accepted as a respectful and inclusive term for common use.

Parent Lending Library

Books and videos on topics related to parenting are made available in the Learning Together Centre for loan to parents.

Newsletter

Monthly newsletters include: photos of parents and children playing, the theme for the month, weekly speakers names, dates and discussion topics, and a review of a new web site to check out on parenting ideas, and may include a recipe or new craft to try at home.
Drop In

This term indicates that a parent is not required to attend all sessions of the program with their child nor do they need to notify the teacher that they will be attending. Parents are free to pick and chose whatever days they would like to attend.
Acknowledgements
CHAPTER 1: LEARNING TOGETHER IN THE YUKON

The basis of student success in public education is the foundation laid in the years before formal schooling begins (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2010). A positive and stimulating learning environment, supported by family members, serves to create the conditions that will allow students to be self-confident and motivated as they move into the more structured world of the public school. Learning Together, the first program of its kind in the Yukon, is modeled after the StrongStart BC Program. Learning Together is an early childhood program that brings the teacher, family, and student together to begin the process of learning for children as well as their parents and teacher. The Learning Together Program (LTP) is designed to provide a stimulating environment where three and four year old children come together with their parents or caregivers to play and explore at their current level of development. Furthermore, the LTP promotes social inclusion by addressing a range of diverse child and family situations.

Many school communities in the Whitehorse area and some of the outlying communities have requested the program for their parents and preschool-aged children. The goal of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of participants who attend the LTP at Selkirk Elementary School in Whitehorse. Because the LTP is new in the Yukon, understanding the experience of some of the adults who participated in it and how that understanding connects to future program development is important. A phenomenological study devoted to this understanding is an effective way to gather information for the following
reasons: to create a base for making improvements in the program itself and in its
delivery, and, to inform stakeholders that the program goals are being met.

The Learning Together Program:

- develops child and parent/caregiver interaction through play-based activities that
  support early learning;
- provides opportunities for parents to observe and practice early learning
  strategies that promote healthy child development;
- promotes the physical, social, emotional, and language development of young
  children;
- builds the capacity for later learning by providing a rich and stimulating play-
  based environment;
- provides opportunities for parents to access information from other
  professionals, agencies, and services;
- fosters effective parenting through modeling and informal discussions;
- creates an easy and natural transition to kindergarten;
- promotes an inclusive environment, developing understanding and respect for
  cultural diversity.

Figure 1. Goals of the Learning Together Program

I am an experienced elementary school teacher and have been teaching the
LTP since its pilot in May of 2010. The LTP has been visited and observed by many
individuals who are interested in having a similar program in their community. The
gains that the LTP children and adults have achieved have created the desire for me
to take an in depth look at how it functions from the point of view of the parents. For
my project I completed a phenomenological study to describe the experiences of
parents/caregivers who attended the LTP. I conducted interviews with parents and
caregivers that participated the LTP. What follows is a sample of questions that were used in the study (complete questions can be found in Chapter 3).

- Can you share your perceived experience as a participant in the LTP?
- Do you feel you have benefitted by being a part of the program ...?
- What do you feel would improve the program?

The research question I proposed was: “Do children and their family members appreciate the extensive learning that is developed through play and the enhanced parent/caregiver/child relationship as a result of their inclusion in the LTP?” I hope that the responses to the questions and the discussion would allow me to better understand the participants experience with the program, the dynamics of the program and how it can possibly be improved.

Learning Together is the first project of this kind in Whitehorse and indeed in the Yukon, Territory. As the largest and only Yukon city Whitehorse includes the majority of Yukon students and is often seen as where new educational ideas are implemented and piloted before other Yukon communities attempt to implement them. This study will serve an important purpose, because findings may help to better align the experience of Whitehorse parents with the goals of the LTP. As well the study will inform the design of the LTP to address possible changes and improvements by using the experiences of the adult participant as a means of understanding the way the program has been carried out and point to future enhancements and possibly to program expansion in the Yukon communities. The parent interviews will provide information as to whether parents feel their involvement in their child’s play has advanced their child’s development and
whether it has strengthened their bond. The study will shed light on whether parents believe that their child’s skills have developed through their interaction at the LTP and through activities they may have done at home as a result of that participation.

**Origins of the Whitehorse Learning Together Program**

Elizabeth Lemay, the Yukon Department of Education’s Superintendent of Programs and Services, initiated the introduction of the LTP in the spring of 2010 as a result of the Yukon Early Development Instrument (EDI) findings and her familiarity with the Strong Start Program in British Columbia. The EDI measures population data related to early childhood development in key areas of child development: *physical wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication and general knowledge*. The EDI also assesses children’s vulnerabilities in these areas. In the *BC Policy Brief* (2001), the term “vulnerability” describes “the portion of the child population that has poorer development in one or more of five developmental domains each one fundamental for the child to thrive” (p.1). Measuring children’s vulnerability determines which portion of the population will experience challenges in school and society without additional support. The EDI shows the gaps in children’s development and the areas that require improvement.

The Oxford Centre developed the EDI at the Child Development Centre at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Many countries around the world use this instrument, including Australia, Chile, and Egypt. The EDI demonstrates the
effectiveness of programs and initiatives that are implemented to help improve the health, wellbeing, and competence of the population. The instrument is comprised of 104 questions about child development that kindergarten teachers complete for every child once they have worked with the children for approximately five months and have a good understanding of their development. The questions relate to the categories of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication and general knowledge. The results of the EDI give an indication of the experiences of children in a given geographic area from birth to their kindergarten entry. The information gathered provides evidence to support initiatives that promote healthy child development, such as the LTP.

Differences in the environmental conditions in which the children have grown up affect disparities in the EDI results. According to child development specialists, these early years are the most important. Hertzman and Lori (2007) provide an example that indicated the importance of firsthand teachings: “The nurturing qualities of the environment to which the children are exposed in their early years literally sculpt the developing brain” (p. 1). Furthermore, Shonkoff, Boyce, and McEwen (2010) note the following about early childhood development:

Children’s early years development has an effect on every other stage of their development: as they start school, move into adolescence, and become an adult. Early childhood development is highly correlated with social-emotional and academic development in the middle years; with adolescent health and well-being; and with adult health problems: obesity, mental
health (depression), heart disease, high blood pressure, and non-insulin dependent diabetes. (p. 54)

Quality early childhood development helps prepare children for life-long health and wellbeing. The relationships children develop with caring individuals in their lives, such as parents, caregivers, families, and communities, are the most important aspect of their development. The positive and stimulating experiences that children have with these influential people in their lives have a direct effect on how their brains will develop.

The spring 2010 Yukon EDI results indicate that 38.8% of Yukon children are vulnerable on at least one scale of development, with indications that in one rural area 43.9% of children were vulnerable (Yukon Government, 2010). Due to high-vulnerability EDI scores, the Yukon Department of Education (equivalent to a provincial ministry) began seeking initiatives that would help support children’s healthy development. The disparities in the children’s development warranted action:

Being developmentally vulnerable at school entry means that children are, on average, more likely to remain behind as they progress through the school system and ultimately, to struggle with the skills and competencies needed to succeed in life as an adult. (EDI Community Summary, Government of the Yukon, 2010)

In the Yukon, the Department of Health and Social Services has a mandate for early learning from birth to five years of age. However, there has been a movement across Canada for education ministries or departments to assume responsibility for
the early years. As a result, Elizabeth Lemay, the Yukon Department of Education's Superintendent of Programs and Services, took a proactive approach by directing a committee to look into establishing the LTP in Whitehorse, anticipating that such a program would satisfy the need as demonstrated by the EDI results. Irene Szabla was chosen by Lemay as the Committee Chair. Szabla has extensive knowledge of the early childhood community in Whitehorse, as the former director of the Child Development Centre in Whitehorse for 17 years. Szabla coordinated a committee to discuss the development of a program that would provide an opportunity for parents to participate in preschool with their children. The LTP was established to encourage family members to interact with their children in meaningful ways. Parents would partake in expressive play using toys and activities to help foster their child's early development. In addition, the program would provide a preschool experience for children who were at home with parents or caregivers and who may not be accessing other programs in the community.

The British Columbia Strong Start program is a drop-in preschool program that was developed in the fall of 2006. It provides early childhood experiences for children who are at home with parents or caregivers. The program offers well-equipped environments where children can explore new learning opportunities as well as gaining social opportunities with other children. The program gives parents the opportunity to come together with other community members and develop relationships and connections while interacting with their children. Moreover, Strong Start provides parents with ideas about how to stimulate and extend their child's learning and development at home.
In the Yukon, Szabla's committee supported the implementation of the Learning Together Pilot Program (LTPP). The LTPP began in the spring of 2010 and ran for six weeks from May 6 to June 16 of that year at Selkirk Elementary School. Lemay chose Selkirk, an elementary school in the Riverdale neighborhood of Whitehorse, because it had extra space available to house the program. The drop-in program ran Monday to Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11:30. Parents and children could come and leave at anytime within these hours as well as attending as many or as few days a week as they liked.

At the time, other preschool programs were available in Whitehorse: *Purple Stew, Mother Goose, Parent Participation Preschool, the Child Development Centre Preschool Program,* and the *Aboriginal Head Start Program.* As well, preschool was a part of some local day care programs. Many of these programs included some but not all of the components that the LTP offers, the most significant of these components being that a parent or caregiver must attend with the child. Other program components include: a full-year period offered four mornings per week, drop-in service, no fee attached, a school setting, structured circle time activities, snacks provided, centre play time with parents, school library privileges, gym time with access to school equipment, no formal registration required, speakers on topics of interest to parents, a parent lending library, and a monthly newsletter.

The LTPP was made available only to families living in the Riverdale neighbourhood. Advertisements were placed in the three Riverdale elementary school newsletters: Selkirk, Christ the King and Grey Mountain. Eight families
participated in the pilot program. The positive comments made by the participating families and the observed development of the children who attended, resulted in the pilot project being extended to a year-long program in September of 2010. Participation in the LTP expanded to include all families in the Whitehorse area.

**Description of the Learning Together Program**

The LTP is held in a bright, large room with inviting space, a high ceiling and large windows facing east. The area is half of the school’s old gymnasium that was built in the 1950s. The spaciousness provides ample room for the block, house, water, sand, dramatic play, craft, puzzle, book, and puppet centres. The middle of the room boasts a large and vibrant carpet that provides the area for circle activities. The space adjacent to the carpet area accommodates three child-size tables for fine motor activities and snack time. The puzzle and book centres border the carpet area, providing engaging and quiet activities used to gather the group prior to the beginning of the circle activities. The high walls offer abundant space to display the children’s creations, giving them a sense of belonging when they come to what they call “their school.”

The LTP provides an opportunity for parents and preschool children to attend a welcoming, organized, and well-equipped play program directed by a qualified early childhood educator. The program provides play-based activities that stimulate early learning experiences for children. The program helps adults support all aspects of healthy child development, including physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and
communication skills through play-based activities that provide a rich learning environment. The dramatic play, puzzles, blocks, books, sand and water activities, stories, shared reading, art, and music provide opportunities for parents and children to interact. The program helps meet the four key areas of early learning: wellbeing and belonging, exploration and creativity, language and literacy, and social responsibility and diversity (Policy Document: Strong Start BC).

The LTP is designed to be responsive to the learning needs of all children; the children's first teacher, their parents, accompany them to ensure that learning styles are met as they move through choices of classroom activities. By the time the children enter the program parents already have a good sense of how their children learn by observing them on a day to day basis. Also, children are encouraged to sit and observe circle time activities and to join in when they are comfortable doing so. The LTP environment is arranged to engage kinesthetic and visual learners by providing a wealth of interactive experiences that engage them in discovery and imaginative play.

**A Typical Day in the Learning Together Program**

The program is open to all children prior to their entry into kindergarten. Children need to be accompanied by an adult caregiver for the duration of each visit and the adults are expected to participate in all aspects of the program. Program designers anticipate that, through participation caregivers would discover new ways to support their child's learning at home and also make connections with others attending the drop-in program, thus helping to develop and strengthen the child's sense of community. The LTP provides an environment that is welcoming,
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well organized, and interesting. Activities are play-based and developmentally appropriate, with circle time and snacks being available at each drop in. The facilitator is knowledgeable about early childhood development and can share knowledge and experiences with adults and children.

The LTP at Selkirk School is two hours each day. One hour of each session is devoted to parents and children playing together. Parents are encouraged to allow their child to direct the play and to engage in conversation with their child during this time. That conversation can be a back-and-forth exchange or it can be the parent verbalizing what he/she is observing the child doing, for example, "I see you are lifting the airplane over the truck." Parents are encouraged to use concept words such as over, under, between, and next to while they are playing with their child. These words are displayed in the room and copies are provided for parents to take home as reminders to include them in everyday activities. During playtime, children are allowed to move from activity to activity, staying at each one for as long or short a time as they desire. They are not expected to clean up before moving to a different activity. A two-minute light warning is given to signal the end of playtime. After two minutes, another light signal indicates that everyone is to put his or her hands in the air, clap, and sing the clean-up song. This instruction encourages everyone to work together to accomplish the task of putting everything back where it belongs.

Throughout the play centre, I have posted individual words or signs at different play stations to help with the process of cleaning up. For example, at the sand centre, a sign indicates that all sand toys should be placed on the shelf underneath; at the toy animal centre, there is a sign asking to stand up the animals when returning them to
the shelf; and at the house centre, individual words are taped inside the cupboards to show where the appliances and individual dishes are stored. This process helps to establish the routine of the program and develop in children a sense of order and responsibility for looking after the toys they have played with and perhaps links to the parent expectation at home.

**My Interest in The Study**

My interest in this study grew out of my experience as the teacher of the LTP in Whitehorse for the past three years, from 2010 to 2012. I received my Bachelor of Education Degree with a major in Early Childhood Education from the University of Calgary, Alberta in 1981. My teaching career of 31 years has been in elementary education in northern British Columbia and the Yukon. I began my career teaching kindergarten in the mining community of Elsa, Yukon, in 1971, having completed a three-year teaching certificate at the U of C. In 1980 I returned to the U of C to complete my Bachelor of Education. I have 10 years of elementary classroom experience, teaching kindergarten to grade four. As a result of my keen interest in working with children who struggle to acquire literacy skills, I held the position of a special education teacher for 17 years, helping children obtain the skills necessary to become independent readers.

In the spring of 2010, my assignment at the Department of Education was that of a Literacy Intervention Consultant. It was at this time that the Department organized a committee to look into establishing a program for preschool-aged children and their parents/caregivers in the Yukon. When I heard about the program, I inquired as to whether I could take on the role of teaching the program.
as part of my assignment. The committee was consulted and I was offered the opportunity to establish the first LTP in the Yukon. This assignment worked well administratively, because at the time there was not an established budget for the program.

With my background in early childhood education and my extensive teaching experience, I am knowledgeable about the foundational skills that parents can develop by assisting their child to acquire confidence and learning skills that are so necessary for future success in school. I believe that parents are their child's first teacher, though many parents are not aware of the many simple ways that they can increase their child's confidence, motivation, language, and learning-to-learn skills. When developed, these skills help children become confident and successful learners. When parents engage in play with their child they are helping to develop and strengthen the child's ability to focus; by engaging in conversation about the play, they are helping their child build language skills, and these language skills, in turn, help strengthen their child's social skills. Thus, family capacity is enhanced as parents take an active part in their child's learning. All of these skills help lay the foundation for their child's future formal and informal learning.

In order to move confidently and successfully through the education system, children need to be able to read. Parents can provide their children with many pre-reading skills in enjoyable ways that help them develop confidence at the same time as strengthening the parent-child relationship. As children move through the school system, it is easier for parents to work with them when they need assistance if they have an established pattern of collaboration. It is easy to help a child at three and
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four years of age to work on acquiring skills through play, thus establishing that collaborative relationship.

Not all parents are aware of the many pre-reading skills that they can help their child acquire through play and how much fun it can be for both parent and child. Play is a child’s work (McCain, 2007). Preschool children naturally embrace the opportunity to be close to and play with their parents. The LTP provides an opportunity for this parent-child engagement to occur. Moreover, the LTP gave me, as the teacher and as a parent myself, the opportunity to share my knowledge and expertise with parents by modeling, discussing, and providing speakers and resources such as the Parent Lending Library and the Learning Together Newsletter.

The LTP also highlights parents’ skills. Not often do parents get an opportunity to observe other parents engaging with their children, unless they are friends or family. Observing the day-to-day encounters of parents guiding their child’s development through discussion, modeling, play, encouragement, correction, and reading is instructive. All parents have their own way of parenting and many can recognize instantly when they are observing beneficial behaviours. The LTP enables parents to watch others and learn through that observation; the program also enables them to reflect on how they deal with similar situations with their children, or how they may want to do something differently.

Another positive aspect of the LTP is the sense of community. Mothers and fathers develop relationships with other mothers and fathers, whom they may not have had another opportunity to meet. For example, one parent can be seen
holding another parent's baby so that they can help their preschooler get organized to paint. Invitation extend to play dates and birthday parties, which often come as a pleasant surprise to community newcomers. When everyone comes together to help put all the toys back to where they belong in the room, there is an overall atmosphere of cooperation and excitement as parents and their children learn to interact with each other in a positive school setting, thereby establishing the groundwork for an ongoing collaborative school relationship.

I believe that the LTP would be an asset in any community. It not only provides stimulating opportunities for children in their early years which affect every other stage of their development, but also helps build and strengthen the community, as participants share, grow, and learn together. Therefore the indications are that the LTP would be appropriate in any setting urban or rural even if the EDI results are strong, because of the community building aspect of the program.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

It is important for children to be involved in a well-defined early childhood program in order to create a foundation for further learning. Positive parent-child relationships in a school setting at a young age are a precursor to later school success. Furthermore, because of the success of the LTP in Whitehorse, it should be possible to establish similar programs in all Yukon communities.

The LTP constantly reinforces parents' understanding of their role as their child's first teacher. In this program, parents learn skills that facilitate their child's
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learning and development through the daily circle and craft time. In addition, weekly visitors help introduce parents to community resources that promote children's wellbeing and healthy family functioning. A major objective of the LTP is to reinforce parents' understanding of themselves as their child's first and most important teacher. The LTP also impresses upon parents the necessity of ensuring that they maintain a relationship with their child's teachers once their child begins school and throughout their child's school life.

In this chapter, I have described the importance of documenting parent's experience of the LTP in Whitehorse, for the purpose of improving the program and possibly establishing similar programs in the Yukon and elsewhere. I have noted my own involvement as the program's instructor and outlined the history and design of the LTP as it was modeled in the Yukon after the BC Head Start program. I have provided an overview of the method I used to gather perceptions of their experience with the LTP and previewed the findings of the study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The LTP at Selkirk Elementary School in Whitehorse was designed to provide a strong educational base for a large number of preschool children and their families. Requests have been made for the program to expand not only in the city,
but also in many other Yukon communities. Developing an understanding of the experience of the parents who have attended the Selkirk Elementary School program can provide valuable information for other communities who are interested in the LTP.

In the Yukon, the results of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) warranted that an educational program that targets children before they enter kindergarten is integral to student success. The LTP took shape using the principles of Early Childhood Education (ECD) as a basis for development. By interweaving ECD principles into the program, the concept of parent-child connections is crucial; in particular, the relationship between child and parent in an educational setting provided the rationale for developing the shared approach that the LTP uses.

One of the factors considered in the program's development was the knowledge that traditionally, First Nations education was based upon cooperation, reflection, and inter-generational connections, powerful factors in a child's becoming a productive group member. The LTP uses this approach as a methodological foundation for its daily activities. In addition, the LTP uses play as a medium to encourage the development necessary for the child before entering formal schooling. The alarming results of the EDI highlight the need for an expansion of the LTP in each of the Yukon communities. Based on these factors, the following literature areas will now be examined in detail: Early Childhood Education, Parent-Child Connections, First Nations and Learning Styles, and Play.

**Early Childhood Education**
Experience in children's early years has an effect on their later development. Both positive and negative relationships have an impact on the child's later development since “... early childhood development (ECD)- including the physical, social/emotional and language/cognitive domains strongly influences basic learning, school success, economic participation, social citizenry, and health” (Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007, p. 45). The most important aspect of children's development is the relationships they develop with parents, caregivers, families, and communities. The experiences children have with these influential people in their lives have a direct effect on how their brains develop. The more secure the parent/caregiver attachment, the more confidence the child has to explore their environment. The connections that the child's brain makes as a result of exposure to stimulating environments have an influence on not only cognitive and language development, but also social/emotional and physical development. Children thrive in atmospheres that are responsive, stimulating and safe, where they can learn about their environment through exploration and play. This development lays the foundation for a lifetime of successes as they grow and develop into healthy contributing members of society. Goelman, Anderson, Kershaw, and Mort (2008) validate that “[f]amilies are the first and most important places for children’s learning and care. In order to raise healthy children families need time, resources and community supports” (p. 15). The LTP was developed to provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers to spend time playing with their children, to introduce them to community supports, and to offer literary and play-based resources for the families.
The provision of quality ECD programs to support children's development during the early years is crucial to ensuring that children grow up to become healthy, happy, and productive citizens. In order to be effective, these ECD programs need to target all aspects of child growth: physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive. Irwin (2007) argued that "A healthy start in life gives each child an equal chance to thrive and grow into an adult who makes a positive contribution to the community-economically and socially" (p.15). In the LTP, parents become aware of the crucial role they play in their child's development. This role is developed by engaging their child in play activities: "Potentially, one of the most effective strategies for improving ECD is to find ways to convince parents and caregivers of the importance of play and the ways they can promote it" (Irwin, 2007, p. 21). The LTP helps develop parents' and caregivers' understanding of the importance of playing with their child and the profound effect this play has on all aspects of their child's development.

The consensus of findings on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) indicates several significant factors. Well-designed and well-implemented programs contribute to positive academic and social-emotional development outcomes for young children, especially those who face socio-economic, biological, and medical disadvantages. Furthermore, these programs allow children to think for themselves, which connects to "better cognitive performance in later schooling" (Goelman, Anderson, Kershaw, & Mort, 2008, p. 8). These high-quality programs include responsive and cognitively challenging features with sustained shared thinking.
The LTP aims to help parents support all aspects of their child’s healthy development, including physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills. These objectives develop children’s language, creativity, imagination, and fine motor and social skills:

The experiences in the early years of life set biological pathways that affect cognition, behavior, the capacity to learn, memory and physical and mental health throughout the life cycle. (McCain, 2007, p.59)

To add to McCain’s key points on learning, Bredekamp and Copple (1997) further elucidated the benefits of play: “Play is a vehicle through which children develop socially, emotionally and cognitively” (as cited by Fantuzzo&McWayne, 2002. p. 80). As Meisels (2001) asserts, the “Early experiences ... provide a template for learning and are the true litmus test for how well children will do in school and manage the daily events in their environment” (as cited by Badgi, 2005, p. 145). Play therefore provides a foundation for further development by connecting a child’s inherent strengths with the skills needed to flourish in a school setting. That foundation is further strengthened by the development of the connection between parent and child in the context of school.

**Parent-Child Connections**

As per Bagdi and Vacca (2005), “[s]hared positive emotional experiences between caregivers and children serve as building blocks for the development of
social and emotional well-being in infants and toddlers" (p. 147). These shared experiences that children have with their parents in their early development help to lay the foundations for their later wellbeing and scholastic success. Children who experience these positive social interactions have a strong base on which to flourish in their growth and development. Children who do not get this support are often more fragile and can require additional supports as they grow and develop. Positive social-emotional interactions with supportive and loving parents and caregivers help children develop the confidence that allows them to explore, investigate, and learn about their world.

The LTP provides an opportunity for parents to interact with their children in stimulating and developmentally age-appropriate learning centres. The child benefits from the individual and undivided attention the parent is able to provide him/her in this environment, thus establishing the building blocks for the child’s well-being and later success:

It is clear that shared positive emotional experiences between parents and their children serve as building blocks for the development of social and emotional wellbeing in infants and toddlers. Furthermore, a healthy sense of wellbeing leads to resilience, thereby supporting the child’s ability to effectively interpret, experience, manage and cope, with joyous as well as distressing events in their life. (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005, p. 147)

Pisapia and Westfall (1994) identified significant relationships with adults as one of the factors critical to the development of resiliency. Children develop resiliency when they are able to experience positive interactions with their parents. The
LTP was specifically developed to provide an environment where parents and children can experience many such positive and varied interactions. The program helps promote parent-child relations as well as develop early learning experiences through play, which helps to foster emotional wellbeing in children. The program provides a safe, predictable base for exploration, which is what Erickson and Vygotsky assert that children need (as cited by Badgi & Vacca, 2005, p. 146).

The LTP is supported by research indicating that the relationship between parent and child has a direct bearing on the child’s future success. Children whose parents participate with them are more likely to have greater achievement in school: “Programs that offer both a parent and a child component appear to be the most successful in promoting long-term developmental gains...” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). Doherty (2007) reviewed many early childhood program reports and concluded that parental involvement in structured, centre-based programs has a marked effect on the development of at-risk children. The more positive family involvement young children experience, the more they benefit: When their parents or caregivers engage in activities with them, they demonstrate learning in the areas of: social competence, cognitive development, communication skills, literacy development, vocabulary growth, expressive language, comprehension skills and positive engagement with peers, adults and learning. (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006, p. 1) Positive engagement with their parents helps children develop their self-confidence, self-esteem, and emotional self-regulation. These positive experiences translate into positive learning outcomes for children. The first years are important because they are the time when children learn the basic skills for later learning.
When parents play with their children, they make a difference in the skills and attitudes their children develop.

The National Institute of Child Care Health and Human Development (2004) notes that parenting is the single strongest predictor of children’s success. Specifically, when parents provide a warm and nurturing home environment, children demonstrate better cognitive skills. Based on this knowledge, the institution argues that serious consideration should be given to working more directly and intensively with parents in an attempt to support children’s early development.

The Early Childhood Matters Journal conducted an interview with James Heckman in 2009, the leading authority on the economic case for investing in early childhood programs. In the interview, Heckman argues that early childhood programs have a considerable impact on the child’s ability to learn and succeed in life skills such as curiosity and engagement with the world. He also indicates that early childhood programs facilitate children’s development in their ability to delay pleasure, relate to other people, and understand/cope with criticism. While Heckman summarizes the importance of parenting in the early years, he does not suggest how to most effectively improve parenting.

Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, and Bradley (2003) argue that “Families can influence their children’s school performance through the relationships that they form with their children’s school” (p. 181). Rimm-Kaufman et al.’s results suggest that children whose families are more involved in their schooling show higher scholastic competency, higher achievement in language and math, and higher
ratings on peer interactions than those whose families reported as showing less involvement. McWayne(2004) reports that children of involved parents “were observed to be more cooperative, self-controlled, and prosocially engaged in both home and school environments” (p. 373). The LTP provides this type of parental involvement; children at a very young age are able to see their caregiver work hand in hand with the school to provide the support that will carry them through the succeeding years.

**First Nations and Learning Styles**

In the 2006 Canadian census, 25% of the Yukon population identified themselves as Aboriginal. Of this population, 83% identified themselves as Yukon First Nations. First Nations children learn more readily through visual media in comparison to European cultural groups of children (Pewewardy, 2002). Many learn more effectively through observation and participation with family members, in addition to being more likely to watch and listen to a demonstration before attempting to model the skill. Teachers can mistake this behaviour as a lack of motivation, when in fact this is part of a First Nations child’s learning style. First Nations children may need more demonstrations because they will likely not attempt a trial-and-error type approach to learning(Pewewardy, 2002).

It is essential that teachers in the LTP take into account how First Nations children can succeed in the context of early childhood education. Pewewardy (2002) describes how the learning modalities of First Nations children are affected by their cultural upbringing. Historically in First Nations communities, children were not
formally educated in school settings. When First Nations children were taught a skill, they first observed as the father, mother, or an elder modeled it; children were expected to watch, listen, and then do. Pewewardy emphasizes that First Nations students are typically visual-holistic learners who derive meaning as it relates to a broader context. For example, they need to see a completed puzzle before putting pieces together; they are not linear or step-by-step learners, who will follow directions without understanding the end product. As visual learners, these children learn best when they are able to see the material that they are expected to learn. Moreover, First Nations children tend to be reflective learners, spending more time watching and listening before they respond. They focus on process rather than product and favour cooperation over competition. In addition, they enjoy opportunities that bring them together in cooperative learning groups and focus on collectivism instead of individualism (Pewewardy, 2002). Brendtroet al. (1990) reinforces this point of view by arguing that First Nations children bring to school the idea of self-imposed goals. “Native child rearing is strongly influenced by the principle of guidance without interference. Elders teach values and provide models, but the child is given increasing opportunities to learn to make choices without coercion.” It follows then that a cooperative approach in education better meets the needs of First Nations children.

Play

Play is a child’s way of making sense of his or her world (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Fantuzzo (2000) notes that children develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills through play. Children are drawn to what others are
doing and ultimately end up interacting with other children while at play. Through experiences with other children, they can learn correct emotional responses to situations, such as not resorting to physical violence; appropriate social responses, such as sharing; and how to approach situations, such as inviting others to play.

Children may learn while playing, but also while observing others play. Nicolopoulou, Barbosa, Ilagaz, and Brockmeyer (2010) demonstrate that "social pretend play can promote development both in the domains of cognitive and language and in the dimensions of social competence, such as social regulation and cooperation, and interpersonal perspective taking" (p. 42). At play, children are totally engaged and enjoying new experiences. As a result of engaging, they continue to explore and are unlimited in their development. Environment plays an important role in encouraging further exploration. Preschools with many educational toys and games provide a fertile setting for children to develop verbal skills, cognitive skills, motor skills, and creativity (McCain, 2007). Providing a stimulating environment is precisely what the LTP promotes.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review covered these themes: Early Childhood Education, Parent Child Connections, First Nations and Learning Styles and Play. A unifying concept that runs through all the themes is that of the parent child relationship. Each theme identifies that the relationships a child establishes in their early years
with their parents is crucial to the development of the child's sense of self and how they relate to the world around them.

Early childhood researchers indicate that the child's relationships with their parents have a direct result on their brain development. The stronger and more secure the relationship is the more the child thrives and is able to develop emotionally, socially and cognitively. Strong early childhood programming helps to support all areas of child development therefore helping children to develop into healthy, happy members of society.

Researchers in the field of Parent-Child Connections share the same thoughts as do early childhood educators: strong relationships in the early years with parents help develop children's wellbeing and later success in life. The selfconfidence that develops as a result of positive experiences between parents and children helps develop children's resiliency: the ability to handle both the positive and negative experiences of life.

First Nations and learning styles indicate that the element of child parent relationship is strong as traditionally children learned first by observing their parents or a family member show them a skill before they attempted to do it on their own. Their education was based on cooperation, inter-generational connection, all of which necessitates the development of a relationship.

Play theorists advocate that well designed and well implemented programs help build on a children's inherent strengths. Strengths that are increasingly more developed the more children are connected with their parents through positive interactions. Play is an avenue whereby those interactions can flourish.
CHAPTER III; DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Whitehorse experienced a six-week pilot of the first LTP in May of 2010. At this time, the EDI results for the Yukon were made publically available. Based on these results, Lemay, the Superintendent of Programs and Services for the Department of Education, allotted monies for this program. The program is now in its second full year of operation. Many school communities in the Whitehorse area and some of the outlying communities have requested the program. As the teacher of the program since its inception, I want to provide as much information as I possibly can to assist this process. Many of the parents/caregivers who attend comment regularly on the benefits they have seen for their child as well as for the establishment of the program in our community. The research question I am posing is: do children and their family members appreciate the extensive learning that is developed through play and the enhanced parent/caregiver/child relationship as a result of their inclusion in the LTP? I want to document the perspectives of those who attend. I hope to provide an account of the parents'/caregivers' own experience as well as their perspective on their child's experience. Groups planning to establish the program in their communities may be interested in these parents' and caregivers' viewpoints.

I chose qualitative research, particularly phenomenology derived from interviews to explore the experiences of parents/caregivers who attend the LTP in Whitehorse. I analyzed these experiences to develop a description of the essence of the shared experiences of the parents and caregivers who have attended the LTP.
According to Creswell (2007), "The phenomenological approach focuses on the meaning of people's experience toward a phenomenon" (p. 57). Furthermore Wilson (2002) in his paper on Albert Schutz, refers to Schutz's idea that "People are engaged in an ongoing process of making sense of the world, with their fellows and we, .... are seeking to make sense of their sense making." Sanders (1982), in her article contrasting phenomenological research methods with traditional paradigms, makes the point that the object of the approach is to get to the essence of an experience through interviews and other forms of human activity (354). She further states that whereas establishing research limits and data collecting are fundamental to all research, phenomenological data analysis adds a new dimension to the approach (357). She states "... the value of phenomenological approaches to organization research is that the emergent themes may serve to validate (or repudiate) and complement qualitative research findings (358). I chose a phenomenological approach because all of the participants have had the common experience of attending the LTP. The strength of this approach is that it focuses on the common or shared experience of these individuals. By discerning the common experience of the people attending the LTP, I believed that I would gain a deeper understanding of the features of the phenomenon.

I audio recorded (with interviewees' permission) and transcribed structured face-to-face interviews. The interview protocol I created had ample space between each of the nine questions in order to make notes on the interviewee's responses. The final comment on the protocol reminded me to reciprocate by thanking the participants for their time. Interviews were conducted at the Learning Together...
Centre while we were not in session. An attempt to ensure that we met in the most comfortable place where interviewees could generate dialogue was established. When we met for the interview, I went over in detail the purpose of the study and the duration of the interview. This information was included at the top of the interview protocol to ensure that I remember to discuss it with each person I interviewed. The consent form for the interviewee to sign was made available, giving me permission to interview them. How the information I gained from the interview was going to be used for my study was explained in detail. I offered to provide a copy of the report for each person's interest once the project had been completed and ensured them that everything that was shared with me would be confidential. I explained that I would use a pseudonym when I quoted their responses in the report unless they specifically asked to be named. During the audiotape interview, my laptop was used to transcribe the interviewees' answers in the event that the audiotape did not work. I informed the interviewees that we may need to meet again and ensured that they were aware that they could stop the interview at any time and decide not to participate.

Parents/caregivers were contacted by phone, by e-mail, or in person. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were asked if they would be willing to respond to the following questions about the LTP:

1. How did you learn about the Learning Together Program (LTP)?
2. Can you share your perceived experience as a participant in the LTP?
3. Can you share your child's perceived experience as a participant in the program?
4. Do you feel that you have benefitted from being a part of the program, and if so, in what ways? Have you perceived a benefit for your child? If so, please elaborate.

5. As a result of participating in the program, do you feel that your relationship with your child has changed? If so, in what ways has it changed?

6. What is your child’s favorite part of the program?

7. Given that you have been involved in the program, is the program providing you with new information that you may want to share?

8. What do you feel would improve the program?

For the purpose of this study, I asked 11 participants if they were willing to be interviewed. The largest group that attends the LTP is mothers; therefore, I interviewed two mothers of three-year-old children and two mothers of four-year-old children. I also interviewed three grandparents, two First Nations families, and two fathers. I had these completed interviews transcribed and returned them to the participants for their feedback. Once I received their feedback, I went through the written accounts and highlighted significant statements that illuminated the parents’/caregivers’ experiences. I looked for similar themes in the accounts and wrote descriptions of these themes. I then wrote a composite description that presents the common experiences of the participants.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of participants who attended the LTP at Selkirk School in Whitehorse. Because the program was new in the Yukon, a phenomenological study devoted to understanding participants’ experiences was appropriate. The results of the interviews provided information about parent perceptions as to whether their
involvement in the program has helped develop their child’s skills and confidence to approach new learning situations. Once the transcriptions of the interviews were complete I returned them to the participants for their feedback. I gave the participants a two-week timeframe for this process.
Chapter 4: Data Collection

I gathered data for this project through in-person interviews. I conducted the interviews with parents and caregivers who attended the LTP as a means of addressing my research topic: A Collective Approach to Learning and Teaching at the Centre of Parental and Child Involvement. I received permission from the Yukon Department of Education to conduct these interviews. I personally invited prospective interviewees to participate in the project.

Eleven interviews were conducted in total. I conducted nine interviews at the LTP site in Selkirk Elementary School and two interviews in the interviewees' homes. I conducted the interviews in the evenings during the week and on weekends during the day between April 2 and April 27, 2012. The places and times for the interviews were at the sole discretion of the interviewees.

Prior to the interviewees arriving at the Learning Together Centre, I set up the recording devices, interview protocols, and beverages. Once they arrived and before beginning the interviews, we chatted about the weather and other light topics as well as chuckling over the small size of the interview tables. This exchange helped provide a relaxed atmosphere to ensure that the individuals being interviewed felt comfortable. Prior to the interviews, I held a discussion with each participant to provide a summary of the research project. The purpose of the summary was to inform participants of what the study was about. I provided them with a copy of the summary which explained the intent of the project. The summary also informed participants that the Department of Education had given me
permission to conduct these interviews and that the full requirements of the UNBC Human Ethics Board Review had been satisfied prior to my contacting them. I included the name and contact number of my immediate supervisor in the summary, should they wish to contact her about any aspect of the study. I invited all participants to ask any questions they might have before the interview began. I assured them that the information they shared with me would be confidential and also that they could withdraw from the project at any time and their interview content would not be used. Furthermore, I informed them that their taped interviews would be stored in a locked file in my home for a period of two years and then would be destroyed.

I purposefully selected participants for the in-person interviews to ensure that all of the various groups of individuals who attend the program were represented. All participants signed a consent form providing me with written informed consent prior to the interview beginning. I interviewed four mothers, two fathers, three grandmothers, and one mother and one grandmother from the First Nations community. The interviews consisted of the following eight open-ended questions:

1. How did you learn about the LTP?
2. Can you share your perceived experience as a participant in the LTP?
3. Can you share your child's perceived experience as a participant in the program?
4. Do you feel that you benefitted by being a part of the program, and if so, in what ways? Have you perceived a benefit for your child? If so, please elaborate.
5. As a result of participating in the program, do you feel that your relationship with your child has changed? If so, in what way has it changed?

6. What is your child’s favorite part of the program?

7. Given that you have been involved in the program, is the program providing you with new information that you may want to share?

8. What do you feel would improve the program?

I recorded the responses to these questions on a digital tape recorder as well as on an IPAD to ensure that no part of an interview would be lost due to faulty equipment or technological error on my part. This recording technology also enabled me to maintain eye contact with the participant for the duration of the interview. The interviews took a minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of 40 minutes to complete. In addition, I had note-taking possibility setup during the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, I expressed my sincere thanks to each person for their time and willingness to be interviewed for this project.

Once completed, all of the interviews were professionally transcribed. I gave a copy of these transcribed interviews to each participant for feedback, allotting a two-week period for this process. When these were returned I took each individual interview and separated the comments according to the themes covered in each question. I brought all the comments together for each theme and looked for connections between what each individual was stating and layers of meaning within these categories.


**Introduced to the LTP**

The common experience shared by all the persons interviewed for this project is attending the Learning Together Program (LTP). The parents and caregivers who I interviewed were introduced to the LTP in a variety of ways: three read advertisements in different newspapers, three heard from neighbors who were attending, two read bulletins in public buildings, one was told by a mother at a playground, one did not remember how she found out about the program, and one heard from a grandmother at the Canada Games Centre:

I was talking to another grandmother there and she recommended this program. She had looked around at all kinds of programs for her grandchild, who she had full custody of, and needed something to do. And she felt this was one of the best programs she had come across. It was close to where she lived and it didn’t cost anything and it didn’t mean that she had to go all the way to the Canada Games Centre with her granddaughter. She had spent quite a lot of money on Purple Stew and she couldn’t really afford it.

(Interview E)

The diversity of ways in which participants heard about the LTP demonstrated that all the avenues used to advertise the program had been fruitful and that word of mouth was a powerful factor in spreading information.

**Parent/Caregiver Experiences**

When parents and caregivers spoke about their experiences while attending the LTP, a recurring theme was an appreciation for the opportunity to be in a play-
based learning environment with their child. They described the experience of observing and interacting with their children and helping them learn to make decisions while playing. Participants also noted that they developed a deeper awareness of who their child was and a greater understanding of their child's learning style.

Respondent E realized that her child needed practice in problem solving. By being present and sharing that experience with her child, she developed an understanding of her child's learning style. Respondent E appreciated the opportunity to interact with her child as they both engaged in learning, the child about her task and the adult about the child's learning:

I saw her doing things which didn't require language but, which she was not very good at, but just required looking and doing and following and, you know, practicing. And I saw how stubborn she was and how she would keep going and going at the same object again and again which she'd .... I hadn't thought about ... that this is what she was like. This is what she is like – she's very much intent on doing things. I enjoyed watching her learn these things and interacting, learning. (Interview E)

The respondent realized that her child needed to watch and listen over time before developing the confidence to try moving to the next step. The concept of "learning together" seems exemplified in that process.

By being with her child while he played, Respondent K was aware of the progressive steps in learning that her child was mastering. She remarked on the amount and variety of learning that her child engaged in:
...just having that time with my child and watching him learn and being able to see the changes that have happened in ... I guess we started coming in September ... so just in those six months. So just with his language, with his being able to recite things and the work that he does in crafts. So watching him cut out a circle or do a wavy line or even the painting and just the different concepts as far as that goes. (Interview K)

The respondent saw time as important, but felt that focused time was even more significant. Observing the child over months of activity allowed the respondent to understand that growth was occurring.

Respondent A noted that her daughter learned in a variety of ways. She expressed how important it was for her to be present and observe her daughter’s development. She also mentioned how being there while her child is playing allows her to teach her child skills as the opportunity arises. In the following passage, Respondent A commented on sharing, also mentioning her younger child:

it has been an amazing time of learning with my daughter, for me being with her and seeing her learn, seeing how she learns, seeing the different ways she learns and how she responds. It is very special for me. It has been fascinating watching as a parent. It is very special. It gives me an opportunity to watch their development. And how they play to help them with their play. And, you know, teach them about sharing and that kind of thing ...(Interview A)

The respondent was able to see that the child was practicing the skills which she would need as she continued through school.
Respondent B's remarks demonstrate the value she places on sharing time with her child in play. By spending time with her child, the parent has acquired an appreciation of her child's development and a growing awareness of her daughter's personality. Moreover, Respondent B realized just how important communication is and that communication is a two-way process. She understood that there is a reciprocal quality to the interaction with her child:

...but this is like sitting down together, playing together, we're doing a puzzle. We're talking about the pieces. We're talking about problem solving. We're talking about going to the store and getting change. We're talking about what flavours of the ice cream we want or what princess we are and where we are going. It is a lot of theme imagination for her. And I've benefitted by learning ...not that I don't know Kelsey ... but I just learned a little bit more about what she likes to do and who she is as a little person ... just by playing with her and communicating and talking and having those conversations. (Interview B)

The respondent was aware that learning is a two-way process; her understanding of her child's learning helped her enhance and develop that learning.

Respondent J noted that the individual time she spends with the child is very important. She valued the one-on-one relationship focus of the LTP:

One of the only times I have one-on-one time with my daughter and am totally focused on her. Other programs are not so centered on child-parent interactions and this is important to emphasize as least some of the time in
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our busy lives! (Interview J)

The respondent saw the LTP's focus on parent-child interaction as very significant.

Respondent G recognized that family dynamics (in this case sibling rivalry) affect the quality of play and the connection between her and her child:

So it has been a nice opportunity for me to help my son in the middle, Dominique, make his own decisions, figure out what he likes to do. And it is a place where he has that freedom more than he has at home. His brother can kind of dominate a lot of what they play. (Interview G)

Thus, the respondent’s observations about the way her child learns in the LTP helps her see the child in a different light, without the influence of the sibling.

Parents and caregivers commented on the variety of learning activities and opportunities available for the children to engage in during playtime. They emphasized that these activities are a key component of the program and considered the opportunity to explore and be creative as an important element. They came to the LTP because they see the value in their child being exposed to these learning opportunities.

Many of the learning opportunities parents realized that they could do at home but may have chosen not to because of the resulting mess, they had not thought of doing it, or it was too difficult to orchestrate with a younger sibling present. Respondent K commented on the diversity of learning opportunities available at the program that are either not available or not feasible in her home:

I always use painting as the main example because it is the clean up part of it and trying to keep well, my four year old and having a mobile baby, so the
painting is something I wouldn’t choose to do at home. So for favorite things to do which is interesting. But even when he was working on the hammering and the nailing ... again something so simple, but I wouldn’t have done it at home. So I think that is really great stuff and the sand table and the water table. So they are able to experience all of those things. At home, just for me I always think of the mess as opposed to the learning part of it. He needs to do that, but I have to do x, y, z before the set up and there’s the take down of it. So here it is so much simpler. (Interview K)

Similarly, Respondent D noticed her son’s positive response to a messy activity that is available at the program:

... the water table there ... and my son Dominique loves the mess. I don’t give a lot of opportunities in our house to have big wet messes because I really don’t enjoy them that much <Laughter> myself. So it was nice that we could go somewhere else and he could get that out of his system. ... <Laughter> Because if he didn’t I found that it came out other ways. But playing in the water table seemed to satisfy a certain need that he had – to get wet and make a mess and play with things that way. (Interview D)

Respondent J also recognized that her daughter needs and enjoys the exposure to play that she does not encounter at home. She valued her child’s freedom and opportunity to explore the various learning centres:

There are a lot of things she really likes here that she doesn’t get to do at home – painting and yoga and stuff like that. The water table and the sand
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Table and even some of the crafts and that type of thing. It is nice to give your child those type of experiences and ways to be creative and have fun.

[There is an] opportunity for children to explore and be exposed to activities they might not otherwise have a chance to experience. (Interview J)

All respondents saw the exposure to play as extremely important in their child's development. Moreover, they viewed the free-form nature of the play in the LTP as significant.

The value of the social opportunities as a result of participation in the LTP for both the adults and the children was highlighted in the interviews. Many of the respondents identified the positive experiences that they and their child had in the area of social relationship-building. This social element seemed to be a high priority for caregivers, based on the needs of their child, but also their own experiences in school and in life. What runs through many of these responses is the recognition that how the child gets along – and indeed how the caregivers themselves get along – in a school setting is as important as any other goal. According to Respondent H, “I totally enjoyed it. I enjoyed visiting and sharing with other parents. And being able to bring my granddaughter here for play, social ...” (Interview H). Respondent I also remarked on the value in developing both her and her child’s social skills:

My oldest is very cautious so I think for her it is good to get out in group activities. Definitely the scheduled group activities where she is forced, not really forced, but encouraged to participate in a group experience is a really good experience for both of us. (Interview I)
Respondent F recognized that the LTP provides a safe environment to interact not only with his child but with the other adults who are present. He realized that his own shyness can be a major inhibitor and saw the program as a way of ensuring that his daughter develops more confidence and overcomes her shyness:

Sarah and I have been coming here for a while. It's been mainly a useful tool for us as I'm a shy person and she is a shy person. It makes sure that we get out and that we are social with others. There are a lot of parents you get to know through this program. So then I'm a lot more comfortable. As a result I think Sarah gets a lot more comfortable too, which has helped her grow a lot. Just being able to speak, and interact and do things on her own without me.

And we've been really using this for our lives. (Interview F)

The respondent understood that shyness is a social inhibitor and sees the LTP as a way to help both himself and his daughter to develop the social confidence to overcome much of that shyness.

Respondents identified another separate but related aspect of the program when commenting on how their own lives have been enriched by their and their child's connection to the program. The program has enabled Respondent J to form friendships with other adults who have children of a similar age to her own:

She [my daughter] has two older brothers and so we don't know that many people with younger kids. I did a lot with my older boys but I don't know too many other people who have younger kids. So that was another thing too, getting to know a few other parents. And getting to know some people in town with some younger kids. So that was another benefit for us. (Interview J)
Respondent C enjoyed interacting with and learning from other parents:

I think part of the benefit for me is my interaction with other parents in the group. And sort of seeing how they are dealing with different things, giving some ideas, and, you know sharing information. (Interview C)

For respondent G, the program provided an opportunity to meet people in the city:

“Well one of the benefits is meeting the other parents in the area and the other children ... for myself ... Because I'm new to Whitehorse.” Respondent H emphasized how the program gave her daughter the chance to engage in social situations with other children: “At first she wanted to stick with me because I've brought her up and she has spent all her time with me. It was very crucial that we did get out and participate in play programs.” Respondent D remarked on how the program has improved his quality of life: “[The program] Makes my life a lot easier. And I get a lot of friends out of it too. Just like the kids get friends out of it. I met a lot of parents out of it” (Interview D). The respondents realized that the program has facilitated not only their child's process of fitting in and developing relationships, but their own as well.

Respondents noted that the flexibility of the program was effective.

Knowing that they could participate when it worked for them and their children and being able to bring siblings to the Learning Centre to play were convenient aspects of the program. Respondent C appreciated the option to bring other children:

And that was really helpful that the younger siblings could come because without that opportunity, I couldn't have brought Mary because there would be nobody to look after Martin. So that was really


valuable and he’s gained a lot from being in the experience here too.

(Interview C)

Respondent D liked the drop-in format:

I liked the fact that you weren’t...you didn’t have to come. You could come when you wanted to come and leave when you wanted to leave. You have to work around children’s needs and wants and your own needs and wants as well. So if you could come twice a week that was great. If you came 3-4 times per week, that was still great. (Interview D)

The free-form aspect of the LTP seemed to appeal to these respondents.

The respondents’ experiences with the LTP in the area of social connection thus fall into three broad categories: the recognition that their child benefitted from interaction with other children, the feeling that they themselves benefitted from the opportunity to play with and talk to their child within the program’s structure, and the observation that their family unit as a whole benefitted from the social relationships that were developed on site and that the program provided opportunities for positively changing the dynamic at home.

Communication

When I asked the parents and caregivers what their child’s perceived experience as a participant in the program had been, a common theme that emerged was communication. Parents commented on their child’s improved communication
skills since joining the program, as well as the conversations resulting from experiences at the LTP that carried over into their home.

Many respondents shared how their children's ability to communicate about their experiences at the LTP is a benefit and has had an enriching effect on family dynamics. Respondent B remarked on how the program had become a source of dinner conversation between her daughter and her husband: "Well Kelsey is very vocal so she does like to talk about what she does in the day, and every night when we sit down at dinner she tells her dad what she did and what she learned" (Interview B). Respondent A reported similar results, commenting on the benefit of "Being able to bring what we do home and talk about it with dad..." (Interview A).

Respondent A elaborated as follows:

And we talk about their projects on our drive home and they enjoy that. So it's fun and it just starts a conversation for us. It's something for us to talk about. At dinner time they will share what went on, the program, and what Finnegan did. (Interview A)

Respondent K also noticed that the program brings conversational opportunities:

And just when we come home ... at the dinner table, we all share what our day had been like, so he's able to now contribute into doing something different as well. ... he can relate to his older brother who is in school... they can have a conversation about the library books that they chose. (Interview K)

Similarly, Respondent I viewed the program as having a positive effect on her conversations with her child: "We talk about preschool all day long" (Interview I).
Thus, the program opened and strengthened the line of communication and connection between parents/caregivers and children.

During the snack time at the LTP, the children are encouraged to have a conversation with their parents about what they did together in the morning. They then take turns sharing their conversations with the group. Respondent J commented on how she saw this practice as being part of socializing and learning to talk to others:

And it is also things you have asked the kids to participate in when they are here during snack time – is to get used to talking about what you have done during the day and having that experience to share with others. Because that is just part of socialization and being able to talk with each other. Right?! And that is the beginnings of that. I think so.... (Interview J)

Respondent I commented on how she has observed a growth in the child’s ability to communicate through this process of discussing during snack time:

Her language has really improved. So at first she wouldn’t really talk out loud to anybody that she didn’t know. Now that we’ve come, I guess that we’ve been here oh probably since September – so a few months, she talks in the group setting. When you ask her about what she’s played with that day, she may not face you and tell you but she does say things out loud. So that’s really improved. For her, that’s a huge step. (Respondent I)
Parents also commented on improvements in the quality of their child's language. Respondent D noticed the following change in his child since he started the program:

His voice and his vocabulary was weak. And now it is much stronger and he can talk and communicate much better. That I think is very good. Here at the learning centre has helped that because he's interacting with children and he's learning to share a lot more. (Interview D)

Thus, parents and caregivers perceived communication as a major factor in the child’s experience in the LTP. The respondents also recognized the importance of their children being able to express themselves clearly both at school and at home.

**Child’s Favorite Part**

When I asked the parents and caregivers what their child’s favorite part of the program was, the answers were varied and enthusiastically shared. Parents laughed and became animated when they discussed this information. While they were talking about it, they appeared to be experiencing the enjoyment that they had observed in their child. One parent responded with a concise yet positive statement:

“I think she just loves every aspect of it except for leaving” (Interview A).

This feeling was echoed in another parent’s comment:

But he really enjoys the gym time. So he likes to do that. He likes the library time. I don’t know that there is..... He likes the snack time. I’m not sure if there is any one thing that he likes the most or he likes the least, but he just enjoys being here. (Interview K)
Without exception, every parent and caregiver shared that their child's favorite part of the program included the centres play time, illustrated in Respondent C's comments:

I think it is the free play. She enjoys the circle. She enjoys the stories but it is the free play and the interaction with the other kids, I think that she... she really enjoys the music, the songs. And I will hear her singing them...... I think. And she does enjoy the gym time and the library as well. (Interview C)

Respondent D had a similar response:

Well I would say it was the centers part. Playing with the different centers. Being able to pick out a center to play with and go from there. And again, being able to play with the different centers and play with different kids.

(Interview D)

Respondents saw the variety of activities available as positive experiences for their children.

Prior to centre time starting, every child is asked to decide where he/she is going to play first and share this with the teacher in as complete a sentence as his/her developmental speech will allow. This exercise encourages the child to think and make a decision rather than just moving into the space and following the lead of other children. Most children had a preferred centre where they would play first and then move on to another. Respondent J shared that her child's preferred activity was:

...definitely usually when you ask her what she wants to do, it is play with the babies. That may be a result of not having any younger siblings. But she is
definitely drawn to that playtime and especially and in particular to the babies she plays with quite a bit. (Interview J)

Respondents also mentioned Finnegan the pet rabbit as being a main attraction for many of the children. One respondent commented, “They especially enjoy the rabbit. Yeah. Finnegan was a star. I say they because I bring my grandson as well although he is just over two” (Interview C). Another parent remarked on the appeal of Finnegan for her child in particular: “She loves the bunny for sure. Again, I’ve said earlier that we don’t have any pets so just being able to have a live animal around [is exciting for her]” (Interview J). The room is very well equipped, with the centres containing a variety of toys that many children do not have access to at home on a regular basis (e.g. sand table, water table, and painting easel). Centres time is an opportunity for the children to move throughout the room, accompanied by their parent or caregiver, and stop at any centre of their choice to play. Movement is fluid as the children are not required to stop and clean up until the end of the 50-minute playtime. When playtime does end, everyone joins together and co-operates in putting everything back where it belongs. Signs in the room help this process along (e.g. “please ensure all the toy animals are standing after play time,” “please put the sand toys under the sand box when play is finished,” etc.).

The fact that the child and parent played together resonated throughout all of the comments as an activity that the children really enjoyed. The comments of Respondent I illustrate the value of parent-child play to the child:

…and I think she really appreciates that it is something that we do together.

It’s not like a playgroup where there are a bunch of kids running around with
unstructured activities. But it is something where all the activities involve the parents or caregivers. So it is really hands on and she really appreciates that—the quality time—doing it all together. (Interview I)

Respondent A had similar comments about the importance of parent-child interaction:

So I think that the fact that she is able to always have a chance to be special. You know one on one with me or with another parent....she wouldn’t know that but I think being able to have that adult time all the time throughout the program is probably what endears her to the program so much. (Interview A)

Respondents stressed the connections between parents/caregivers and children as a result of the program’s activities.

One parent noticed that as a result of her child’s enjoyment of the program, the home dynamics in the morning had changed:

I think because it is something that she wants to do and I want to take her to, there is less fighting in the morning to get out the door.... because that has always been a difficult part in our morning routine – is getting out the door. So she’ll have her coat on and boots on and wait on the steps. And that is like a dream come true! (Interview A)

Overall, the participating children were motivated to be part of the LTP, which was largely due to their positive experiences when they attended. Children found free play, centres, and the opportunity to play with the room’s pet rabbit as especially enjoyable. A pervading theme in these responses was the idea that sharing, both
between adults and children and between children and children, was a powerful component.

**Relationships**

Children benefit from shared positive experiences with their parents/caregivers. The LTP is organized in such a way as to provide opportunities for these positive social interactions. The individual and undivided attention children receive from their parents/caregivers in this play-based environment helps to develop their emotional security, thus establishing the building blocks for their wellbeing and later success. Irwin, Siddiqi, and Hertman (2007) argue that the most important aspect of a child’s development is the relationships he/she develops with parents, caregivers, families, and communities.

In the interviews, I asked parents/caregivers if they felt that participating in the program had changed their relationship with their child, and if so, in what way it had changed. The following parent/caregiver comments demonstrate that they felt that the LTP had helped to strengthen the bond they shared with their child and increased the attachment between them because interaction was such an integral part of the program. Respondent A described how the program had been beneficial to her relationship with her child:

I think it fosters more attachment between us so I really enjoy that. It makes me feel like a good parent frankly because I’m going and learning with her and engaging with her and having focus time with her. ....I think it has been really good for us and we have gotten closer ... I believe ... through doing
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those things together because I can give her that one on one time when she wants it. But I think being able ... what we do together now at home ... we'll talk about stuff that we've done at preschool and even we were talking about emotions the other day and talking about those eggs that you had. And everything, it's a source of something that we can go back to and expand on. It is something common that we have together that's I'm learning and she's learning and we're doing it together so it's fun. Yeah it comes back to that attachment which is hugely important. (Interview A)

Respondent J had similar feelings:

I was looking for something that we could do together and kind of build our relationship and strengthen our bond together. ....this is the first program that to me it seems like the focus is on the interaction between the child and the parent and strengthening that bond and really engaging with your child, which I haven't experienced in other groups. So that is definitely a way that I perceive it to be beneficial for myself and also for my daughter too. We all live such busy lives that we often don't make that one on one time for our kids. (Interview J)

This parent went on to discuss how the experiences they share at the centre help to enrich the evening conversation with their family members, thus strengthening their bond with the entire family:

We always share it too with our family at the end of the day over a dinner discussion or whatever. So being able to let the rest of the family know what
we've done and you know just the great experience that we've had here. And so sharing that with our family it's an enriching part of our day being here. So yeah, I think it is great for everyone all around. .... I think it is basically just strengthened our bond. (Interview J)

Respondent E commented on the increased opportunity for one-on-one communication between her and her granddaughter that the program offers: “So she got to have me, which she didn't normally get to have me 100% of the time. So that was her benefit. I think we did a lot more bonding because of that” (Interview E). Thus the bond between parent/caregiver and child was strengthened as a result of the activities which the LTP offered.

In contrast, one respondent felt that her bond with her child had not changed at all because it was already very strong. Another respondent noticed a slight change as a result of the communication skills her granddaughter was learning:

I'm not sure that it has so much because I spend my whole day with them, with her. But she's learned some skills that make our relationship better. You know, learning to look at you and when she speaks and to respond appropriately and that sort of thing. I wouldn't say it was a big change, but ... subtle. (Interview C)

Respondent K noticed a similarly subtle change: “Yeah. I think it has changed a little bit but I don't know if has been significant because we do a lot of that language at home too. And we do a lot of things together” (Interview K). Another respondent experienced an opposite but equally beneficial outcome. She felt that the program was helping her granddaughter to develop a healthy separation from her:
but my purpose was to just peel her a way from me a bit ... at least 2 feet or make that because it was always “mama, mama, mama” and I remember she wouldn’t even let you talk to me. That has changed I guess. That is a big thing actually. I said no, but come to think of it, it was. Because I remember she wouldn’t talk to ... let me talk to anybody. Nobody would talk to me. So yeah. So that was a big step for her. And slowly and slowly that got better and better. (Interview H)

This child slowly began to expand her social awareness to include other children and adults, thereby decreasing her reliance on her grandmother. For others whose relationship with their child was already strong, the change was subtle.

Positive interactions between parent and child help lay the foundation for children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The more secure children are socially and emotionally, the more resiliency they develop: “A healthy sense of well being leads to resilience, thereby supporting the child’s ability to interpret, experience, manage and cope effectively with joyous as well as distressing events in their lives” (Bagdi&Vacca, 2005). In the context of the program, relationship development is predicated on a number of factors: the connection between the respondent and the child within the LTP, the relationship at home that is enhanced because of the in-program connection, and the relationship enhancement based on the respondent and child not always being with each other on a one-to-one basis.

**Adults Learned**

Parents had many comments about what they had learned as a result of participating in the program. One respondent saw validation as very important.
She appreciated hearing a professional support the language she was routinely using with her children:

I've also enjoyed your pointers or pointers of other educators or trainers. Like pointing out different ways of how I can better parent or validating or encouraging me. I remember one day I was trying to help her learn about how to cut with scissors and you said, “good language” or whatever and that helped and made me feel like ... good. You were validating how I was parenting and that was ... you don't get that very much. (Interview A)

Learning various techniques and approaches that can then be brought home for further use and refinement was noted by a number of the respondents. The implication was that a parent or caregiver can learn skills at the LTP and then not only apply them, but also practice them in a safe and supportive environment.

Respondent A elaborated on the skills that she had learned in the LTP:

And also because I have learned different skills. ... It is nice to have little tools in your pocket when you are at home... So when you can think we learned this at preschool and you can bring that into your day and as a mom it makes me feel like I've done a good deed for the day or something you know. ... all of the speakers that have come in have always given something. I just would say that when the speakers come they help us a) to learn more about whatever their topic is; but b) it is that community focus again. So learning about the resources in the community that we can access. And because some times it's just overwhelming to look for help when you don't really know where to go. So that has been good. (Interview A)
Respondent C also commented on the parenting skills she had learned in the program:

And also just being reminded of how you teach them little things like their language. You know things like try to learn “in front of”, “behind”, “on top”, “beneath.” Those kinds of things. I may not have thought about it – whether I naturally would have done it. But this was just a good way for me to say “oh yeah”... that’s how I’ve got to focus on some of those things when we play.

(Interview C)

Respondent F discussed the value of the parenting skills taught at the LTP:

And I learned a lot of things to help her grow as well through this program. Things that I wouldn’t have thought of and just ideas that can help her grow. Like the reading thing – I was asking you about the reading stuff. Now that I know that kids learn words not the alphabet so much. She’s got a lot of books that she already has memorized so... we now can really... she can read the book. Now she understands the connection of the words to the stories. I can help her point those out. Now she points them out and reads along side.

(Interview F)

Parents/caregivers spoke positively about the skills and knowledge they had acquired as a result of participating in the LTP and how they had begun to incorporate this knowledge when playing with their child at home.

Respondents were quick to see that there is an indirect aspect to education which is as valuable as formal teaching. They could perceive that their child was benefitting both from being shown how to do something and by observing other
children in the same context. The respondents were also able to see the same learning dynamic in themselves. For Example, Respondent I commented on the value of learning parenting skills from professionals:

I’ve had a lot of helpful reminders from you and some of the information you have given us on child development I think has been helpful. Just that, ways to communicate with your child and different concepts, that they should be understanding or trying to learn at this point. And so just talking about that and making sure you are trying to engage with you child and talk with them. So I appreciate your help and your advice in that area. Thank you. (Interview I)

Respondent C echoed Respondent I’s comments: “And there have been a few speakers here that I have learned quite a bit from. The last one was just how to prepare your child for emergencies” (Interview C). Thus, the parents and caregivers felt that the LTP was a valuable way to learn about parenting from professionals. In addition, the LTP provided the opportunity for parents to learn from each other. For example, Respondent E learned a lot from observing the other adults in the room and how they were interacting with their children:

Well, like I said... one of the things I know about myself is that I am competitive and another thing is I noticed because you are in a program with lots of other people – lots of other adults and children – and some of them ... What some of the younger women just wanted to sit and chat together, and let the kids play. And some of the older women wanted to push their child to do things and some of them were really ... sort of like trying to correct the
child; make sure they did it perfect craft and I was thinking, well I don't want to be like that, I don't want to be like that. So I was learning from watching what other people were doing. And it was interesting.  

(Interview E)

This respondent was able to use her observation of other adults’ behavior in the context of the program to develop insight into her own attitudes and actions.

Respondents saw acceptance as a key component of the LTP in both direct and indirect ways. Caregivers want their child to be accepted and they themselves need to feel comfortable and accepted as well. Respondent H expressed her appreciation of everyone in the program:

Everybody was so accepting here. Nobody noticed that anyone was different. And we have a lot of mix. So there was nothing to her when like when a black person came in ... or nobody else seemed to be on edge about it either. So it was very nice. I think the room provided that. (Interview H)

The respondents indicated that they benefitted from participating in the LTP on two broad levels. They understood that their active participation was a significant aspect in their child’s learning and development. Moreover, they acknowledged that they benefitted directly and indirectly from observing how the teacher interacted with the children and the lessons that their children learned about social relationships through playing with others. Thus, the learning flowed two ways at all times, with enhanced understanding of and facility with those relationships as the dual benefits.
Child Development

Parents and guardians were appreciative of the positive gains they felt their children had made as a result of their participation in the LTP. They believed that their children had learned from the LTP’s structure and activities. They described what the child was like before joining the program and saw that there had been growth in areas like routines and concentration. They also saw factors such as exposure and learning from others as significant. Respondent D perceived considerable development in his child:

Like when you are doing your reading he would be very fidgety. Now he is quite content to sit and listen. Or if you are at the kitchen center he can spend a half an hour and be very content now as compared to the start he might not be ... He’s interested in 5 things at the same time but not really interested in any when we first came. But now he can be interested in the kitchen for 10 minutes, move on to another little boy and him playing in the water for 10 minutes and then move onto “let’s play with the play dough” for 10 minutes. And that’s fantastic! ...and I really notice a tremendous difference in him.... But he has really blossomed here or blossomed over the last six months. That I’m really very happy that his social skills and his ability to play by himself and interact with children is much better .... He’s evolved that much that it’s a really noticeable evolvement. (Interview D)

Respondent F succinctly echoed Respondent D’s sentiments: “Yeah. She’s definitely got a benefit from it. Just in her confidence level” (Interview F). Respondent G noticed improvements in her child’s decision-making skills:
For Dominique, it has been really beneficial to be able to decide what he wants to play with and find his interests. Like he really got into puzzles, which is something my older son wasn’t into. And it was really neat to see how that skill kind of took off for him. And a lot of it really had to do with going to that preschool and then after that, in the next holiday, or his next birthday, I told his Grandparents that he liked puzzles. So then we got a bunch of puzzles because ... Before that we really didn’t have much because my older son was never that interested in it. (Interview G)

Respondent B felt that the program helped develop her child’s social skills:

...I think with Kelsey she’s probably benefitted by just playing with others because that is one thing she has never had since she was born ... is a lot of play with other children. She was cared for at home by nanny. She never had that daycare setting. Where I find here she is learning to share, to play with others .... (Interview B)

Respondent C was adamant that significant growth and development had occurred in her grandson as a result of their participation in the program: “I think this kind of exposure has been really good for him in his development...because he has just grown and blossomed ...” (Interview C). Respondent A focused on her child’s development in the areas of structure and responsibility:

I never thought that she would be able to cope so well with structure and how it all works with having snack. But I think that the responsibility that she is given for, you know, setting the table or cleaning up or washing dishes or whatever. She enjoys that and does well. (Interview A)
Respondent I discussed the language development in her child as a result of the LTP:

I think the first day I was here, you explained this is a really hands on talkative program so spend time with your child and use all the words – lots of descriptive words and I think that we have taken that home with us. And it has really helped to improve language. And so with my oldest, improved hers a lot but also my youngest who is 2 has caught up on it as well. It is amazing to hear her talk – almost at the same level and it is really from this program a lot. (Interview I)

The developmental gains children have made since they began attending the program have been many and varied. Parents/caregivers were able to identify and comment on the improvement they observed in the areas of focus, concentration, confidence, social skills, language development, and decision-making abilities.

Parents felt that the opportunity for their child to learn skills that would benefit them when they entered kindergarten was important. Respondents realized that the program is to some extent about readiness, and where their child fits on the readiness scale is very significant to their future success in school. Respondent K commented on the value of the program in preparing her son for kindergarten: "It's been very positive for him and even to just think about him getting ready for Kindergarten. So I think he has been really enjoying it. And even just learning the little songs or talking about the crafts" (Interview K). Respondent J elaborated on the ways in which the program prepares children for kindergarten:

I think the other thing too is preparing them for Kindergarten. .... But just having the safety and security of having a parent around in almost a
simulated Kindergarten environment, almost, where there is some structure and some expectations about child behaviour or the structure of the morning or how it goes. What the expectations are of the child so if the child is able to do that with the parent and get comfortable and familiar with that structure within kind of an environment that also allows for their own creativity and expression too. Because I think that will better prepare the child for when they go to Kindergarten and when they don’t have their parent around. They will be able to possibly hopefully follow the routines there and be more comfortable in that situation and transition easier possibly to Kindergarten settings. (Interview J)

Respondent F shared the challenges he faced when he went to school and his hopes that the program will help ease his child into kindergarten: “I was terrified of school. This being such a positive, positive environment makes school a very exciting place. Yeah, I think it will probably, hopefully, make it a lot easier for her” (Interview F).

Thus, several respondents identified the aspect of preparing children for school as being very important. They pointed out that their child’s initial exposure to school was a very positive experience; moreover, because they too felt comfortable and welcome in that context, both child and caregiver felt more prepared for the transition to kindergarten.

**Improvements**

When asked for their input on how the program could be improved to benefit children, the majority of the respondents praised the program and said it was
effective the way it was. The suggestions for change comprised the following: provide snacks at an earlier time, have more time for the crafts, include a music component, allow only preschoolers to come, encourage more First Nations and other ethnic groups to attend, and have a sample of all of the crafts for the current theme displayed with directions. One respondent focused on what he perceived as a lack of multi-ethnicity in the program and wondered why this was so. The way that the LTP was advertised could well be a factor in attracting certain ethnic and socio-economic groups and not others. Therefore, an analysis of that aspect of the program is required.

The respondents tended to approve of the structure of the LTP and the role that the teacher plays. Respondent B’s feedback on the structure was generally positive:

I can’t really think of any improvements. I love every part of the program. I like that we come in and do a morning circle and we talk about different themes that we are working on and we do yoga and then stories and songs. I like that part. I can’t think of any improvements at all. The only thing I find is when I come, I know I’m going to get stuffed up because I’m allergic to the bunny but that is the only thing I can think of that makes me go “oh no”.

<Laughter> I love that it is set up so children that do come to the program kind of get a sense or feel of what a Kindergarten classroom might be like because it is in the same kind of setting. The centers are kind of similar. So I really like that because that might help with that with that transition.... Yeah the structure really works. (Interview B)
Respondent B elaborated on her feelings about the structure of the LTP:

> And I think the snack is a good transition from the playtime. They know that when they finish playing they are going to get a snack and then the craft. For us, the craft comes after your snack if we have time and if we don’t, and often times I will take the stuff and we’ll take it home and finish it off. Or we’ll start it here and then finish it off at home. So it works for us. (Interview B)

Many parents expressed their absolute approval of the existing structure of the program: “I don’t know, I think it is a pretty wonderful program” (Interview F).

Respondent I had similar views: “I don’t know. I really like it the way it is. No, I don’t think I’d change anything” (Interview I). Generally speaking, the respondents were positive throughout, and their critical comments were limited to specifics.

The respondents highlighted the teacher’s active involvement with the children throughout the interviews. All respondents saw this component as a strong part of the program:

> I would like the Child Development Center to promote it. It is what I’d like to do too... As far as the program itself, I really don’t know how you could improve it because I’m extremely pleased with the variety of stuff you have and your involvement with the stories like the three little pigs and you have the felt books. It is not just the story but they [the children] are involved physically in the story. And I think your involvement with the Phys Ed part of it that we enjoyed very much over the winter. To be able to go down to the gym and have a bit of fun. I really enjoyed it. I know Cory did. When we were there, I think a lot of the parents actually really enjoyed that. Because you are
a kid yourself when you are there. I think that was very good. You could play ball hockey or soccer. Walking the plank or a pirate with your kid walking the plank. So I thought that was a really great idea to be able to do that. So maybe to have music ....If you could have music brought in....That maybe you could put music into your program here.....to go into the music room and have the music teacher just play the piano and sit around. (Interview D)

This respondent also felt that the addition of music to the program was a good idea. He observed that the LTP seems to be serving a fairly homogeneous population, implying that the program must reach out to the larger community in order to draw in children from First Nations families and of other ethnicities:

Well, I’ve noticed that there is a lot of people who come but a lot of them are white people for the sake of conversation. And where are the First Nations mothers? And the First Nations mothers really could tremendously benefit from this program as they might have children with greater needs than the ordinary...And the same with the Philippine community. Philippine ladies come but they are not bringing their children. They are the nanny ... bringing little white children and I think something has got to be changed there. That you outreach to the community... (Interview D)

Respondent D touched upon a significant aspect of the program planning, feeling that alternative ways need to be found to connect and develop relationships with certain communities.

Respondents saw timing in of all its aspects as significant. While respondents were very positive about the program, they recommended that the
internal structure be improved to reflect the reality of some of their lives: "I think the program is amazing as is. And earlier I just said if there was longer for the craft time maybe that would be good" (Interview A). Respondent C also recommended additional time for the craft:

We often don't have a lot of time for craft by the time they have their snack and get to start on the craft, there isn't a whole lot of time so Mary might like a little more time although sometimes she doesn't want to do craft anyhow so... (Interview C)

Similarly, Respondent K wanted more time allotted to some activities:

Oh I know. I do have one little one. Maybe I do. I think just at the very end with the crafting, it seems like we just get started and then it is time to clean up and you probably already know this, I don't know but, and that is a tough one because the starting of something and not being able to finish it. The feeling of... that is my feeling that I have or if that is something that is important for kids at this age or if it is a time factor. So do we have less playtime? Snack earlier and then a bit more time for crafting so that... I don't know though. It's a tough one. (Interview K)

Respondent J's comments echoed this overall feeling about time management:

I think this program is excellent. I don't know there is anything I would improve. I think it touches on everything that a child kind of needs at this point. There is dress up things; there's the water table; there's sand; there is
pretty well everything that a child would need or would want to play with and help with development. There are reading blocks and all sorts of things. But the one thing, maybe, I would think.... This is specific to my own daughter, but she just has an earlier snack time. And so I know that often the snack is later that what we would normally have at home so that is the reason that we go out and have it a little bit earlier than the rest of the group. But I thought that maybe that might leave more time for the craft too because often ... sometimes snacks takes a bit longer and we don’t have as much time for crafts as we’d like. Although you do say we can do the crafts pretty much any time during the 2 hours that we are here. We don’t have to reserve it for later. So yeah, maybe in my opinion, I would maybe just move up the snack time just even by maybe 15 minutes. (Interview J)

In addition, Respondent E had suggestions about timing, among other recommendations:

Well, I think one of the things that would help ... I don’t know if the program started a little earlier to coincide with school day. But then that might not help with the people who come from outside the area. They’d have to drive in to here. But it would help people who actually had children in this school and have younger children who come to this class. OH I know the other thing... is a guideline. Because it is not a sign up program, people don’t .... It is a drop in thing. Not everybody knew what was going on all the time. So it would have been nice to have a list with the crafts that you were doing and you did at one point do that – have a list up. And so then you could go and say
we are in this particular area at the moment and doing these big bodies or
whatever and maybe be a guideline to how to do the craft for the adult to
look at. So that people like me who are impulsive wouldn’t sort of like jump
in and try to do it my way. (Interview E)

There will always be a range of opinions between those parents and caregivers who
appreciate the free flowing aspects of the LTP and those who would prefer a more
structured and predictable approach.

The following remark from a respondent critiques a fundamental part of the
LTP. The respondent felt strongly that only preschoolers and no younger children
should be allowed to participate. This comment not only critiques but also
contradicts the philosophy of the program:

This is a pet peeve for me. I truly believe that the program should be just for
preschoolers. And the drive of the program is to get the parents involved
with the preschooler so if the parent comes with two babies and a
preschooler, like you have other parents stepping in. Because sometimes you
end up, and this is kind of what drove me away, sometimes you end up with
more babies here than preschoolers and crawling over everything and
chewing on everything. And I’m a stickler for everything being clean and they
are drooling on the books, drooling on the carpet, drooling on the toys and
then we’re supposedly ... supposed to be teaching our kids. I came to spend
my time with Ava not help a mom with her baby and end up holding a baby
or trying to save a baby from being hurt. So I just felt it was mayhem at the
end of the day when you are supposed to sit down and enjoy a nice craft... No
when some come with 3 children - two younger ones—I don't think it is fair to their child or the other children. The program ... if you want to start another program for toddlers or infants ... well maybe that should be looked at. No that's it. I've been waiting for a long time to say that. And I just feel, the other big thing was ... It started off really great, but I felt the last few times it was just a big visit, gossip session, for some of the moms. Even though some one would say it was snack time or clean up time, they would just go on. There are other programs for that – a couple of drop-in programs. There is Tumble Time... (Interview H)

Another respondent, however, wanted to help promote the program in the larger community to new families that have moved into Whitehorse:

Well, I'd be very happy to promote this program. I guess that is the way I'd like to answer this question. For somebody who is new into the Whitehorse area, what can I do for my kid, I'd be very pleased to promote this program because for so many it is such a variety of things that a child can do and I think it is a very good program. (Interview D)

Much of the program's success seems to be predicated on word-of-mouth. Parents and caregivers talking amongst themselves and to others help spread the message that the LTP is positive and valuable for their children.

The respondents seemed supportive of the program and generally happy with their child's involvement in it. The suggestions for improvement break into two broad areas: the physical side is reflected in the suggestions around equipment, and the organizational side is manifested in several questions and recommendations
relating to both the timing of certain activities and the placement of those activities in the morning schedule. One parent questioned the broader philosophy of the program by asserting that the LTP should only be for preschoolers (e.g. 4 year olds), without their younger siblings participating.

The suggestions for change follow two broad paths: internal and external. The internal aspects of the LTP were seen as positive and worthy of support, needing only, in the opinion of several, some modifications in terms of timing and structure. The external suggestions focused primarily on the need to present the program in ways that would attract a broader-based and more diverse clientele.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The research question posed for this study was: Do children and their family members appreciate the extensive learning that is developed through play and the enhanced parent/caregiver/child relationship as a result of their inclusion in the LTP?

Throughout the discussion, I presented evidence indicating that the family members do value and appreciate the learning their child incurred as a result of their participation in the LTP. Parents and caregivers indicate that the opportunity to interact with their child in a play-based program was a valuable experience. They saw how the one-on-one time affected the quality of the connection between them and their children. Furthermore, they brought their children to the LTP because they saw the value in their child being exposed to the extensive learning opportunities available there.

Highlights from the discussion are:

- Respondents saw social relationship building as a key opportunity.
- The play-based environment had a positive impact on the child’s ability to communicate, as well as increasing the child’s desire to communicate with other family members.
- Respondents deemed the opportunity for the children to play one-on-one with their parents at the centres to be a positive experience that the parents as well as all the children enjoyed.
- Parents/caregivers felt that the interaction with their child through play had strengthened the bond they shared and increased the attachment between them.
• Parents/caregivers indicated they appreciated what they had learned from the teacher, the speakers, and the other parents. Moreover, they and their children benefitted from techniques and approaches that they brought home and practiced.

• Respondents saw the positive gains and readiness skills the children developed as a result of exposure and learning opportunities as significant.

The above key points demonstrate that children and their family members do appreciate the extensive learning that is developed through play. Furthermore, respondents felt that their relationship with their child had enhanced as a result of their attending the LTP.

As a result of my analysis of the responses in this study, I would recommend that:

• all Yukon communities consider adopting a Learning Together Program;

• ways to ensure that more First Nations families and other ethnic groups learn about the existing LTP be explored;

• opportunities for First Nations and other ethnic groups to attend the program be developed by, for example, finding ways that bus passes can be provided for families in need to attend the program;

• more time in the program be set aside for completing the daily craft;

• a period be included for music one day a week as is already the practice for library and gym;
previous crafts pertaining to the current theme be displayed with appropriate directions for completion;

- snack time occur earlier in the morning schedule

I embarked on this study as a result of my experience teaching the Learning Together Program and my understanding of what immense differences can be made for children when their parents are actively involved. This opinion is articulated by Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez (2006), who argue that when parents or caregivers engage in activities with their children, the children demonstrate learning in the areas of: social competence, cognitive development, communication skills, literacy development, vocabulary growth, expressive language, comprehension skills, and positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning (p. 2).

As well as directly teaching the program and sharing this knowledge daily with parents and caregivers, I have been able to conduct research that provided another venue for contribution to the understanding of the great value of parent-child interactions through play. Having parents and caregivers validate and reinforce this knowledge, through sharing their own experiences in an interview setting, has been a rewarding journey.
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. How did you learn about the LTP?

2. Can you share your perceived experience as a participant in the LTP?

3. Can you share your child’s perceived experience as a participant in the program?

4. Do you feel that you benefitted by being a part of the program, and if so, in what ways? Have you perceived a benefit for your child? If so, please elaborate.

5. As a result of participating in the program, do you feel that your relationship with your child has changed? If so, in what way has it changed?

6. What is your child’s favorite part of the program?

7. Given that you have been involved in the program, is the program providing you with new information that you may want to share?

8. What do you feel would improve the program?
Appendix B:

Yukon Department of Education Approval

February 16, 2012

Ms. Beverley Avano
38 Hyland Crescent
Whitehorse
Yukon

Dear Beverley,

Thank you for providing me with a copy of your research proposal for the UNBC Masters of Education programme. A research project on the Learning Together program will be a valuable resource as we expand our work in the area of early learning.

I am pleased to offer my support for the proposed research and the inquiry process with the chosen participants. I will be most interested to read your findings and potential recommendations when you complete your research.

I wish you every success with your study.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Lemay
Director of Programs and Services
Yukon Department of Education
Public Schools Branch
Appendix C:

UNBC Research Ethics Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

MEMORANDUM

To: Beverley Avano

CC: Tina Fraser

From: Ross Hoffman, Acting Chair Research Ethics Board

Date: March 30, 2012

RE: E2012.0215.027.00

A collective Approach to Learning and Teaching; At the Centre of Parental and Child Involvement

Thank you for submitting amendments to the above-noted proposal to the Research Ethics Board.

These amendments have been approved for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Ross Hoffman
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Board
Appendix D:

**Parent Letters included in Report on the LT Pilot Project**

**Parent 1**

Learning Together Feedback for the 2010/11 year: it was a fabulous program for children and parent to engage in a guided positive learning experience together - the teacher was excellent, she was extremely knowledgeable in early childhood education and excellent at sharing information with parents and delivering a developmental appropriate program filled with engaging activities - the program had great flow and organized to meet the full range of learning needs -- the teacher was respectful, caring, compassionate and passionate about her work and the children and parents benefited from her excellent communication and classroom management skill. - the healthy communal snack is an excellent addition to this program sharing food and the preparation is a rich experience for building community, responsibility, sharing, social skills.... -classroom layout was well thought out to support learning and developed throughout the year to create a dynamic space that grew along with the children (with all the additional art, pictures and learnings from the children.) the program had great flow and was highly organized to meet child development needs --a welcoming, safe, supportive environment for kids and parents to gain a strong and united educational foundation - can't say enough good things about the teacher and this program - the drop in nature of the program is great -- although more difficult for the teacher - teacher Bev's flexibility and skills shone again is she adapted to the new comers and
changing number with ease and grace (or so it appeared!) - wow! the only constructive feedback would be to have a cap on the number of parents and kids to fit the space to ensure the quality of the program remains intact.

Parent 2

Hello! This is D____ mom. I just wanted to thank you for taking the time to run such a great program. D____ and I really enjoyed the time we spent there. Everything about the program was such a great learning experience, the yoga time in the morning, reading time, the crafts, playtime and the interactions with the other preschoolers. It really helped D____ develop his social skills and learn about routine at school. I loved the interaction and the activities we had the privilege of participating in. I hope the program will be back next year to help D____ prepare for kindergarten! PS I noticed a photo of me and D____ at the education building.

When you take those down if you are discarding them could you please let me have it? It was such a beautiful picture. I would appreciate any others you have of the 2 of us as well; they would be perfect for his scrap book. Thanks again!!!

Parent 3

Learning Together program is a gem in the selection of pre-school programs in Whitehorse. The fact that it is centrally located and in a properly designed kindergarten room is fantastic. The space is wonderfully equipped and there is no shortage of materials for young children to explore. The best part though, is the teacher, Beverly. She is the quintessential pre-school teacher, warm, welcoming and
A Collective Approach to Learning and Teaching

energetic. The opening circle time is an excellent time to capture the children's focus and it works well. I admire Beverly's ambitious approach to playing educational games that challenge pre-schoolers to make decisions, take turns and problem solve. Games that parents may not have access to or time to play. My son, in particular liked the musical band in which a leader marched around the room followed by a crew of children (and parents) all singing and playing instruments. A few days later did an artwork based on this experience (spontaneously and on his own).

The pet rabbit Finnegan also makes Learning Together unique. What a great opportunity for children of all ages to engage with an animal who low key and safe to be with. What makes Learning Together extra special is Beverly's keen ability to connect with children. She never misses an opportunity to ask a good question, create an interesting challenge or just connect one on one with a child or parent. I admire Beverly's belief in the abilities of children no matter what age or stage. This creates a wonderfully positive environment that makes children and parents feel good about themselves and their capabilities. It is really fun going to Learning Together, knowing both children ad parents are welcome and will come away having learned something new and valuable. Keep up the great work!

Parent 4

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the preschool program. P____ and I wanted to identify some of the benefits that A____ gained through attending the program. The structure and routine are two main points that benefitted A____ as she knew what to expect and welcomed the change of
activities. Like many kids, A__ has a difficult time in changing activities when they are suddenly thrown at her and the program reinforced how beneficial routine can be.

The “free play” time gave her the autonomy to choose the activity she wanted and she was able to use her imagination, be creative with the arts and develop friendships with the other participants. During the “free play” time, I was able to discuss and interact with A__ on her level and I was also able to communicate with some of the other parents with respect to similar developmental issues. I appreciated how there was an expectation for all kids to “clean-up” after playing. A__ continues to develop this at home.

Food is a bit of an issue for A__ and sitting and eating with her peers has given her a bit more courage to try more fruit and different textures.

As A__ is three, this program will continue to prepare her for kindergarten. We would like to continue the program next year and appreciate the fact that I can bring A__’s new brother to the program with us (otherwise A__ wouldn’t be able to attend).

Beverley, you have always been warm and welcoming and, we look forward to attending again in September.

Parent 5

I am the mother of a three year old boy and a two year old girl. My son turned three in and around the same time that we were told about the Learning
Together program by another mom at a local play group we attend. That was in October of 2010 and we have been ‘regulars’ at Learning Together ever since.

The program is magnificent. I cannot say enough good things about it. It combines just enough structure with free play that allows both of my children a wonderful exposure to what school may entail for them. I have attended play groups and story times and have had difficulties because my children are so close in age that they are not keen to accept one participating and the other not. Being that most organized activities are for a certain age group and given they develop so quickly and independently it is very difficult to target any activity at both of them. Learning Together offers the right mix that each can participate at their own level and Teacher Beverley is so in tune with each child’s needs that attends that every child feels welcome, stimulated to their own abilities and truly accepted. As a stay at home parent the fact that Learning Together is free it allows me to be with my children and access resources that we otherwise would not be able to.

Teacher Beverley is truly the heart and soul of Learning Together. She has created an environment in which the children feel safe, welcome and stimulated. She takes the time to know each of the children as individuals and even goes beyond that and makes special crafts, stories and activities that she knows certain children will particularly enjoy. My son has a love of all things heavy machinery so Teacher Beverley went about getting some books, puzzles and activities that she knew would pique his interests. Then she made my son feel so incredibly special by telling him she picked them out just for him. She makes
learning so fun and integrates it so well the kids don't even know they're learning! I am sure my kids go just because they enjoy Teacher Beverley so much.

Not only has Teacher Beverley made the environment so welcoming for the children she has also done so for the parents. She includes the parents in everything she does. She engages us with our children and gives helpful suggestions as to how to tackle some issues they may be experiencing. She also has a wonderful resource of materials that she allows parents to use. Compounded by the professionals that she has come and give special talks it is truly an invaluable resource.

My children have both been exposed to things that I could not offer them on my own and have grown and developed an incredible amount because of that. They are more comfortable around peers and other adults and have an understanding about how to interact in a setting they were unfamiliar with until we starting attending. They thrive on the structure and continually ask to attend. As I mentioned we are 'regulars' and by that I mean I try to attend twice a week, Mondays and Wednesdays. But truth be told it is such a wonderful program that it is hard not to go every day that it is offered!

It is so personally run that I often want to bring something or assist in some way organize or do something! I just can't believe we are so fortunate to have this resource!

______________________________

Parent 6

The Selkirk Preschool program was wonderful for our shy, quiet three year old. At the start of the year she refused to join in any activities in circle time, would
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avoid answering questions and refused to sing along or do actions to action songs. She loved free play, snack time, and crafts but was very timid with anything that put the spotlight on her. As the year progressed her confidence grew incredibly. This was due in most part to the predictability of each morning. The schedule was always the same so she knew what to expect and came to actually love circle time rather than dread it. By the end of the year she loved to participate in song actions, answer questions, and join in games. Preschool has greatly aided her social development in such a positive way! And my girls just loved Teacher Beverley which of course helped!)

I really appreciated the great diversity of activities and toys for the kids. New items were added throughout the year so there was always new stimulation. Projects like watching our seeds grow or making clowns or doing body cutouts or making houses with cardboard were wonderful as there was always something to anticipate the next time we attended. Beverley finds very creative ways to facilitate learning in a fun hands-on atmosphere that feels very "safe" to a more introverted child.

I really just have glowing things to say about every aspect! Snacks were amazing, crafts were perfect for short attention spans, and circle time was a fun time of learning. To have such a fantastic program that is free is invaluable!!