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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Articulating High Quality Free Choice Time in Head Start Preschools: A Framework to Support Professional Development and Classroom Observations

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Free choice time (FCT) is ubiquitous on Head Start and other preschools' daily schedules. Yet, there is a lot of variation in what FCT looks like across classrooms. We lack tools that identify strong FCT practice, including how teachers ought to facilitate it. A framework for defining and gauging high quality FCT in preschool classrooms is overdue. This study documents the development of and preliminary findings from the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT). Based on a comprehensive field- and research-based understanding of a range of teacher practice, this framework articulates low, middle-range, and high-quality practice across 23 elements within 5 dimensions. Findings demonstrate some initial validity and reliability of the framework. The F-FCT articulates a range of quality and can be used to support preservice and in-service teacher professional development. Future work with the F-FCT may have implications for preschool curricula, policy, and teacher professional development.

Keywords: Head Start, guided play, free choice, observation tool, teacher practice

It is free choice time at a Head Start preschool in Northern California. In one classroom, all of the children are busy at a variety of activities, including blocks, dress-up, painting, and working with playdoh. There is a quiet buzz in the room. A small group of girls is gathered around a doll, which is lying on a table. One girl holds a stethoscope to the doll's chest while another puts a thermometer near its mouth. The small group looks solemn. The teacher looks up from her spot next to a child who was making a playdoh snake hiss, moves to the table, and quietly inquires, "Is your doll ill?"
The girls nod their heads yes.
"What kind of sick is she?" the teacher probes.
"We no know," answers the smallest girl.
"Oh, you don't know yet. Well, keep examining her. What kind of community helper are you?"

"We are doctors!" replies the girl who appears to be in charge.
The teacher moves on to another group of children, and continues to move among the children throughout the 45 minutes of free choice time.

A different class is also engaged in free choice time. The room is quiet. It is nearly Thanksgiving, and half of the children are working with the lead teacher to make paper turkeys. The teacher shows the children what to do and then gives each child his or her own materials. The children work silently, and the teacher gently corrects them when they glue things in the "wrong" spots and praises them for engaging correctly with the task.
"That doesn't go there, Han. Do this."
"Good, Julia!"

The other half of the children are at the other large table. There is a tortilla press for every three children, and everyone is making playdoh tortillas. After twelve minutes, the two groups switch activities. If children complete their turkeys before the timer rings, they are sent off to "go play" in the blocks area or the play kitchen on the other side of the classroom. No child is afforded more than 8 minutes for play before the block of free choice time is over.

These two classrooms are less than a mile from each other in the same Head Start district. Although in both classrooms the children were safe and engaged and the teachers purposeful and hardworking, these blocks of time were qualitatively different. The first scenario provides opportunities for children to explore, initiate, experiment, and inquire. The second scenario is teacher directed and objective driven with limited space for discussions. Yet, both were called "free choice time" by the teachers.

According to part 1302.3, subpart C of the Head Start Policy and Regulations from the US Department of Health and Human Services (2016), programs must "Provide adequate opportunities for choice, play, exploration, and experimentation among a variety of learning, sensory, and motor experiences…" The regulation goes on to specify the necessity of both teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities in the course of the day. In general, free choice time (FCT) is intended for child-initiated activities—what Goble and Pianta (2017) refer to as "child-managed" in their description of a balanced curriculum—and some version of FCT is on the schedule in most Head Start and other preschool classrooms across the United States. In this paper, I argue that when it is done effectively, FCT should incorporate the essential elements of play into the preschool day and capitalize on the availability of educators to gently guide that play. Furthermore, I argue that the field should have some common understanding of how teachers ought to facilitate that block of time and what it means to do so effectively, and I offer a framework for FCT. Finally, I provide modest evidence that a common understanding of FCT can be used reliably.

While teacher-initiated learning certainly has its place in the preschool curriculum (Goble & Pianta, 2017), FCT is a uniquely important space in the preschool day for authentic play experiences for children. Theory and research have posited and demonstrated the importance of play for children's development (e.g., Piaget, 1962; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006), providing ample reason to believe that a block of FCT—the time of day that supports authentic play—can enhance the preschool curriculum.

The field has tools that articulate strong practice in preschool classrooms in general (e.g., Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998;

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), but those tools were not designed specifically to account for the unique features of FCT and the ways that teachers facilitate it. In other words, although those tools are used to score classrooms during FCT, the tools do not specifically account for what may make FCT uniquely powerful. Furthermore, a classroom could score high on those measures without including FCT in its schedule, which is problematic if play offers distinct benefits for children.

Conceptual Framework

The Essential Qualities of Play. The work of Levy (1978) and Lillemyr (2009) provides a useful starting point for describing the qualities of play and what differentiates play from other activities in which children engage. Levy (1978) describes play as it relates to the *individual*, in that play requires intrinsic motivation and locating control with the child. Lillemyr (2009) describes *contextual* features necessary for play: (a) participants must be free to engage or not engage; (b) participants must have choices regarding how, when, and with whom to engage; and (c) there needs to be ample time to develop the play. Constraints on these structures—freedom, choice, and time—according to Lillemyr, detract from the fullness of play. In addition, play should be pleasurable and exploratory (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). In sum, authentic play is child-directed, choice-based, intrinsically motivating, and requires ample time to be developed and sustained.

Benefits of Play for Children's Development. Play is an important component of children's overall healthy development. For example, research suggests that play serves a vital function for children with regard to socialization and cognitive development (Barnett, 1990; Lillemyr, 2009). Play is a medium through which children make sense of the world and their place in it. Play may also be important for various realms of problem solving, including not only things like exploring the properties of materials and manipulating language, but also negotiating interpersonal relationships and engaging in low-risk means of understanding the adult social and emotional world (e.g., Paley, 2009). For example, children may use role-playing to sift through their confusion around an adult argument that they witnessed or a current event that they overheard: "Play seems to serve as a buffer for children who often need to cope with change and digest baffling new experiences" (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006, p. 8). Furthermore, research has shown that play supports children's social and emotional development. Play allows for the development of social skills (Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998), such as collaboration, sharing, and conflict resolution (Erikson, 1985; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Additionally, play supports children's emotional development (Erikson, 1985) in addition to children's self-confidence (Trawick-Smith, 1994). Playtime during the preschool day offers time, space, resources, and playmates for all children (Campbell & Ramey, 1994) in addition to opportunities for some adult support.

Importantly, play provides a natural space for children's language development. This is the case for children who are learning in their first language and for children who are learning in a language other than their home language (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013). Due to the child-centered nature of play experiences, the language that is used during play is necessarily relevant to children's interests and experiences (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001), and is, therefore, likely to be built upon and retained (Dunham, Dunham, & Curwin, 1993; Lightbown, Spada, Ranta, & Rand,

1999). Child-directed playtime as part of the preschool day is a rare opportunity for teachers to engage in child-initiated, relevant, and developmentally appropriate conversations with children, the types of conversations that support language development. Since nearly one in three Head Start participants comes from a family who speaks a primary language other than English (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), it is important to consider the specific ways that teachers support language development in preschool (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013).

Taking all of the above into account, play is implicated in healthy child development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), including the full range of cognitive, social, emotional, and linguistic development. Therefore, it makes sense that play should be included and supported in the preschool classroom.

The Teacher as Facilitator of Play. A recent body of work by Weisberg and colleagues (e.g. Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013) theorizes that "guided play" may be the logical middle ground in the perennial debate between adult-directed and child-directed instruction in preschools. While the research that came out of that debate (DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan., 1991; Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, Millburn, & Salmon, 1998; Marcon, 1999) supported the social, cognitive, and academic benefits for children of more choice in the curriculum, what choice looks like in classrooms and what the teachers' role is in FCT remains unclear. Should the teacher direct, guide, or gently guide children? Weisberg et al. (2013) presented "guided play" as the appropriate medium for preschool instruction. In the case of FCT, I suggest that the guidance needs to be considerably gentler than the guided play that would accompany a content lesson with set curricular goals. Thus, guided play and gently guided play are similar but not synonymous, and FCT may be best suited for gently guided play. This type of play is evident in the first vignette, where the children were playing dress up and doctor and the teacher gently guided them to articulate what they were doing.

FCT is an ideal time of the preschool day to bring together authentic play experiences and gentle guidance (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Trawick-Smith, 1994). Teachers are "knowledgeable others" who can support and gently guide children during play (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers' knowledge of and relationships with their students allow them access to children's play. While this access needs to remain respectful of the essential qualities of play (Shmukler, 1981; Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009), it provides opportunities for teachers to gently guide children toward deeper understandings, richer vocabulary and oral language, and more satisfying peer interactions.

Teachers may be apprehensive about joining in play or about how to support children's play (Ashiabi, 2007), and that apprehension may combine with a lack of time, resources, and training (Kagan, 1992) to create barriers to implementing play in the preschool classroom. Furthermore, teachers vary in their theories of play, including the purpose of play and the teacher's role in it (Wood & Bennett, 1997). Wood and Bennett (1997) observed that there was a range of play practice across the nine classrooms in their study, and teachers' ideas about play were not always consistent with the ways that they implemented play in the preschool day. Specifically, teachers tended to structure play far more than they had earlier articulated was beneficial for children. The teacher's role, as Hadley (2002) described, may be inside the flow—where the teacher is a participant in the play and can extend the play, or outside the flow—where the teacher helps the children process the play. Either way, the teacher is present and engaged as a gentle guide—a participant, observer, mediator, facilitator, and/or manager, and the interactions support children's development. Nevertheless, these roles must be actively taught to teachers, since

teachers, for a variety of reasons, so rarely interact with individual children in preschool classrooms (Kontos, 1999). Different kinds of play involve different levels of support and autonomy (Ashiabi, 2007), and teachers need support in judging when and how to engage.

Current Observation Tools. The CLASS PreK ((Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008)—which itself is built upon instruments like the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation tool (ELLCO, Smith & Dickinson, 2002) and the ECERS (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998)—is used across the U.S. to measure the quality of instructional support, emotional support, and organization in preschool classrooms. The CLASS is a strong tool for describing the quality of classroom environments, and it has been found reliable and associated with meaningful student outcomes (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2008) in thousands of classrooms. Like its predecessors, the CLASS is consistent with high quality classrooms more generally and can be used during FCT in addition to other times of the preschool day. However, the CLASS was not designed to look specifically at FCT.

What Would a Tool Focused on High Quality FCT Include? First, in order to be consistent with the essential elements of play described above, the block of FCT should be child-directed, choice-based, intrinsically motivating, and happen with ample time to be developed and sustained (Cegowski, 1997; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009; Nicolopoulou, McDowell, & Brockmeyer, 2006). It follows that the classroom should feel safe and organized in ways that support engagement (e.g. Pianta et al., 2008).

Second, if adults are to be the "knowledgeable others" during play, they need to be engaged in the play (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou et al., 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). This is a careful balance, as adults should not be suffocating the play or the players (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In a classroom with one or two adults and 16 children, however, and depending on how the children group themselves, in 40 minutes of play (Christie & Wardle, 1992), each child would experience on average approximately five minutes of interaction with an adult. If the adult is to support and elevate the play, the interactions need to be rich. Adults should be engaged, interested, and responsive. Furthermore, teachers have a unique opportunity to talk with children during this brief interaction, and that talk has the potential to be rich, relevant, and supportive (Bredekamp, 2004; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978) The teacher has opportunities to model rich vocabulary and revoice children's language (Weisberg et al., 2013).

The elements identified as important in general for supporting preschoolers' language development are likely to be important for dual language learners (DLLs), as well. The measures are flexible enough to account for developmental differences between DLLs and monolingual English speakers so that the teachers' language support would be developmentally and linguistically appropriate for the DLLs (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013). For example, teachers who are supporting the play of DLLs can provide realia as a means of bringing language to life, describe or define new words, gently and appropriately provide sentence frames and other language scaffolds, and bring the home language into conversations and play as much as possible (Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013). A talk environment where the teachers consistently encourage children's talk and promote talk related to the children's activities creates a joint locus of attention, which supports vocabulary development (Clark, 2003). By modeling and encouraging developmentally appropriate talk and revoicing children's talk, DLLs have access to models of vocabulary, syntax, and semantics. Overall, DLLs, like their monolingual peers, require teachers

who are sensitive to their language development. Because the talk during high-quality FCT is by definition relevant and interesting to children, it has the potential to be uniquely beneficial within the preschool day for DLLs (Dunham et al., 1993; Lightbown et al., 1999).

Third, the materials in high quality FCT should be varied, interesting, and open-ended in ways that allow for multiple entry points for meaningful engagement (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Furthermore, the materials should be accessible for children. Materials in high quality FCT might include: arts and crafts supplies; playdoh and clay; books and other literacy media; large and small blocks; trains, cars, and tracks; dolls, costumes, realia, and other dramatic play materials; puzzles and games.

Fourth, a vision of high quality FCT should take into account both the elements that comprise private play-based preschools and the elements that make compensatory programs like Head Start and other preschools unique. While many of the elements are the same in those two contexts, given Head Start's goals it is relevant to consider the focus on skill development, including language and academic development and with a focus on literacy, mathematics, science, and social skills. A tool for FCT should, therefore, include teachers providing opportunities for all children to develop cognitively, socially, and physically (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Murata & Maeda, 2002).

Research Objective

Given the potential benefits of gently-guided play during the preschool day, it is important that we understand what FCT looks like in preschool classes and articulate what strong practice entails. This will provide useful information to support the development of pre-service and in-service preschool teachers, programs, curricula, and policy. The study that follows traces the development of the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT), which articulates what strong practice entails during FCT and differentiates it from weaker implementations. The purpose of this study was to articulate the framework and to establish preliminary reliability, validity, and descriptive data on the tool.

METHOD

This study included two stages: In Stage 1, I conducted initial field work to understand the range of FCT practices occurring in preschool classrooms and to articulate quality based on the literature and observations. In Stage 2, I developed the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT) and conducted a pilot study to establish the tool's reliability and validity and to collect descriptive data on a small sample of Head Start classrooms in Northern California. In this section, I describe the two stages separately.

Stage 1: Initial Fieldwork

Observations in a Variety of Preschools. The articulation of high quality FCT began during 6 months of observations, in which I observed for more than 40 hours in two classrooms with children ages 3-5 and conducted interviews with these teachers and their administrators in a

very highly regarded (Berquist, 1966; Firth, 2006) play-based university laboratory nursery school. FCT comprised the vast majority of the day, so any training the teachers received was focused on how to set up and facilitate meaningful play experiences for and with children. Teachers were apprenticed into their roles, with careful attention to when to enter into play and when to stand back, how to support children as they negotiate with peers, how to create stimulating invitations to play, how to make materials engaging and accessible for all children, and how to talk to children during play. The enactment of FCT was consistent and seemingly powerful—children from diverse ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds and a variety of abilities and home languages were engaged, joyful, and productive for multiple long stretches of time across the day. This nursery school is a model for other play-based and Reggio Emilia programs, with frequent visitors observing its practice and an annual conference on play held on its grounds. Further indicating the school's quality, the waitlist for students is more than two years long, and there is very little teacher turnover.

Having gained an understanding of one high-quality enactment of FCT at the nursery school, I then sought to capture the extent to which the teacher practices I observed there overlapped or differed from those in the Head Start and state-funded preschools. I observed and interviewed teachers in classrooms with students aged 3-5 in 10 Head Start and 14 state-funded preschools within one school district for a total of 80 hours, ranging from 2-3 hours per site using two different observation protocols, one open-ended and one more structured. The goal was to capture a range of FCT practice in terms of what the children were engaged in, what the teachers were engaged in, the materials, and the kinds of talk that were occurring. Every classroom had a block of the day set aside for FCT. The Head Start classrooms used Creative Curriculum, and the state-funded classrooms used what the administrator described as a mix of curricula, including High/Scope, Creative Curriculum, and teacher-designed emergent curricula. Of the Head Start preschools, 6 were in urban contexts, 2 were more suburban, and 2 were rural. Eight of the state-funded preschools were in an urban context, and 6 were more suburban. The observations and brief interviews with the teachers allowed me to conceptualize practices across a spectrum of quality. For example, in many of the state-funded preschools, FCT was conceptualized as "centers time," where teacher-determined groups of students rotated among tables with materials laid out. At one center, the children put together plastic loops into chains; at another center, they affixed stickers to a worksheet; at a third center, they looked through books. The teachers took on the role of time, materials, and conflict-resolution managers, with little interaction about the play itself with the children. In one of the Head Start classrooms that I observed, the children chose their activity for FCT at the beginning of the block of time, and it was expected that they would stay in that area until FCT was over. In yet another Head Start classroom, FCT was taken up with an extended earthquake drill. In still other classrooms, there was a range of how the teachers interacted with the children, from getting down on the floor to work a puzzle with a child and talk about the dinosaurs in the picture to standing in front of the bathroom, calling children over to brush their teeth. This vast range of FCT practice informed the descriptors in the F-FCT. The brief interviews confirmed for me that while the teachers all believed FCT was important, their explanations about why it was important were relatively vague:

"It's good to have different things during the day."

"Choice is good for children."

"We have FCT in all of the preschools."

None of the teachers I spoke with had experienced training on the purpose and practice of FCT.

Dimensions and Elements of the Tool. The framework that was created as a result of this study includes the following dimensions: structures, affect and engagement, talk and language, materials, and opportunities for development (see Table 1). Within each dimension, there are low, medium, and high descriptors for between three and six elements that comprise the dimension. The categories and elements that comprise the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT) (see Appendix) emerged from the literature, and the descriptors emerged from my observations in classrooms. The categories, elements, and research support are summarized in Table 1. While the framework has the potential eventually to be used for evaluation, at present it is recommended for teachers and administrators to reflect on teaching practice, set goals, and consider the complex enterprise of facilitating FCT well.

Consulting Existing Observation Tools. The CLASS instrument was being used as a district observation tool in most of the classrooms I observed. For elements of the CLASS that were, based on the literature, applicable to FCT, I integrated them into the F-FCT (see items with an asterisk in Table 1). However, the CLASS was not designed to look *in particular* at FCT. There are aspects of high quality FCT found in the literature review and observations that were not adequately captured in the CLASS, including structural elements such as uninterruptedness, authentic choices, and time for engagement; language elements such as encouraging children to talk and engaging in talk that is relevant to children's choices; material elements such as having abundant open-ended materials; and developmental elements such as opportunities for cognitive, motor, and social development. (In Table 1, italics are used to indicate these research-based, non-CLASS features which were unique to the F-FCT.)

Using the F-FCT for an Observation. To use the framework as an observation tool, the observer first observes a full block of free choice time and records evidence pertaining to any of the elements at any point during the observation. If there is more than one teacher in the classroom, the observer would focus mostly on the lead teacher for evidence of teacher-child interactions. Immediately after the observation of the full block of FCT, the observer records a holistic score and then uses the qualitative notes along with the rubric descriptors for each element to assign a 1-7 score for each of the 24 elements. The observer transfers those scores to the scoring sheet on the last page of the F-FCT and then finds the average score for each dimension. A combined average of all of the average dimension scores is also calculated.

Stage 2: Reliability, Validity, Descriptive Data

In order to test the reliability of the instrument, I completed a small pilot of the F-FCT in a sample of the Head Start classrooms in two counties in northern California that were different from the district in which I did the initial observations. The two counties are administered together and include 52 Head Start classrooms, making it one of the larger districts in the state. A sample of 16 of the 52 (33%) of classrooms in the counties was used, including proportional representation of full-day and half-day classrooms. Each classroom in the study included approximately sixteen children, a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. All of the children were 3.5 to 5 years old, and all were dual language learners—nearly all speak Vietnamese or Spanish at home. Instruction in the

classrooms was in English, with some modest support in the home language when a teacher was able to provide it.

Sixteen classrooms across nine school sites (1-3 classrooms per site) were observed, each classroom two times over two months, and the F-FCT was completed during each visit. Consistent with CLASS administration in previous research (e.g. Pakarinen et al. (2010), each classroom was observed twice in order to account for day to day variability within classrooms during this particularly dynamic time of day. The scores from the two visits were averaged. In 25% of the classrooms, I was accompanied by another scorer whom I had trained on the instrument in four classrooms previously.

For 11 of the 16 classrooms, the district was able to provide the official CLASS PreK scores from that fall. I ran correlations between the F-FCT dimension scores and the three CLASS domains and correlations between the average and holistic scores and the three CLASS domains in order to do a modest test of concurrent validity.

RESULTS

There was a range of practice across the 16 classrooms. As the skewness and kurtosis data in Table 2 illustrate, the scores for all of the dimensions aside from structures were normally distributed. The range differed among the dimensions. All of the average scores trended high: No minimum average score was lower than 2.8, and all of the dimension means were well above the mean score for the instrument (4.0). In other words, on average the scores were higher than would be expected if the range of observed FCT practice were accounting for the full range of the F-FCT. Additional testing of the F-FCT would help to elucidate whether this district was anomalous or whether the instrument itself requires recalibrating.

The dimension ratings have a range from 1.9 points (materials) to 4.0 points (holistic) on a 7-point scale. In other words, FCT practice in these 16 classrooms varied more widely in the holistic, structures, and talk and language dimensions than it did for materials (and, to some extent, for opportunities for development). Again, within each classroom, the scores were an average of two visits in order to account for day-to-day variability within classrooms.

The internal consistency of the F-FCT was measured by calculating the Cronbach's alpha for each category (see Table 2). The alpha for each of the categories is above .70, with three above .90, suggesting that the items in each category have a relatively high internal consistency—they appear to be measuring the same construct.

The scores between the dimensions for the classrooms were highly correlated (see Table 3). As tends to be the case with measures of classroom quality, high scores on one dimension were associated with high scores on the other dimensions, and lower scores were associated with lower scores.

TABLE 1
Support in the literature for the elements of the Framework for Free Choice Time (F-FCT)

Dimensions of the F-FCT		Elements from Research	References
Structures	○	*Children are free to choose their activities*	
	○	*Children are free to choose with whom they interact*	(Cegowski, 1997; Christie & Wardle, 1992; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Lillemyr, 2009; Nicolopoulou et al., 2006)
	○	Children are free to move around the environment*	
	○	*The block of child-directed playtime is uninterrupted*	
	○	*Child-directed playtime is least 40 minutes*	
Affect and Engagement	○	Children are engaged in activities*	
	○	*Adults are engaged with children, demonstrating interest in children's activities*	(Berk et al., 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou et al., 2006; Vygotsky, 1978)
	○	The classroom is safe and organized*	
Talk and Language	○	Talk is encouraged and conversations are frequent*	
	○	*Talk is relevant to children's play, and play objects are explicitly referenced*	(Bredekamp, 2004; Goldenberg, Hicks, & Lit, 2013; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg et al., 2013)
	○	*Talk is pitched at the particular child's developmental level*	
	○	Teacher talk is intended to discuss, probe, build on student language, revoice, redirect, explain, and extend*	
	○	Teachers model, support, engage, and facilitate relatively sophisticated language*	
Materials	○	Accessible*	(Christie & Roskos, 2006; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009)
	○	Varied and plentiful*	
	○	*Open-ended*	
Opportunities for Development	○	Cognitive*	(Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Murata & Maeda, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978)
	○	*Social*	
	○	*Physical*	
	○	Conflict Resolution*	
	○	Opportunities are for all children, including ELs and children with special needs	

Note. *These items are part of the CLASS instrument, as well. Italicized elements are not directly addressed in the CLASS instrument.

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics for F-FCT Dimensions

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE	Cronbach's Alpha
Structures	16	5.22	0.97	2.80	6.30	-1.50	.56	2.20	1.09	.74
Affect & Engagement	16	4.98	0.89	3.50	6.70	-.07	.56	.13	1.09	.93
Talk & Language	16	4.72	1.16	2.80	6.60	-.07	.56	-.40	1.09	.95
Materials	16	5.87	0.64	4.80	6.70	-.57	.56	-.99	1.09	.83
Opportunities for Development	16	5.11	0.83	3.60	6.60	-.57	.56	.09	1.09	.91
Actual Average	16	5.19	0.83	3.58	6.56	-.62	.56	.33	1.09	--
Holistic Score	16	4.63	1.09	2.50	6.50	-.10	.56	.18	1.09	--

In order to test for inter-rater agreement with the F-FCT, the two scorers scored independently and then compared scores. Inter-rater agreement was high, as illustrated in Table 4. The overall exact agreement between these scorers was 64%, with less than 1% of the scores more than one point discrepant. Cohen's kappa was run to determine if the agreement was beyond what would be expected by chance between the two raters' scores for each dimension. There was high agreement for structures (K = .897, $p < .001$) and the holistic scores (K = .636, $p < .05$), and moderate agreement for affect and engagement (K = .433, $p < .001$), talk and language (K = .430, $p < .001$), and opportunities for development (K = .444, $p < .001$). The exact agreement for materials was not significant, perhaps because there are fewer elements that comprise the materials dimension. Overall, this demonstrates that two scorers can use the instrument reliably across a small sample of classrooms.

TABLE 3
Correlations among F-FCT Dimensions, Actual Averages, and Holistic Scores (n = 16)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Structures	—						
2. Affect & Engagement	.74**	—					
3. Talk & Language	.74**	.89**	—				
4. Materials	.76**	.89**	.87**	—			
5. Opportunities for Development	.74**	.95**	.85**	.82**	—		
6. Actual Average	.86**	.96**	.95**	.93**	.94**	—	
7. Holistic Score	.76**	.95**	.92**	.88**	.90**	.95**	—

Note. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

In a subsample of 11 of the 16 classrooms observed (the classrooms for which CLASS scores were available), most of the F-FCT dimensions (aside from materials) were significantly correlated with the CLASS Instructional Support sub-scores (see Table 5). Talk and language and opportunities for development were significantly correlated with the CLASS Organizational Support sub-scores. None of the F-FCT dimension scores were significantly correlated with the CLASS Emotional Support sub-scores. The F-FCT average scores were significantly correlated with the CLASS Instructional Support and Organizational Support scores.

Even with a very small sample size, strong correlations of two of the three dimensions of CLASS with many of the F-FCT dimension scores and with the F-FCT average scores suggest the F-FCT captured in FCT what CLASS is capturing more broadly in these classrooms, particularly in terms of CLASS Instructional Support.

TABLE 4
Inter-rater Agreement for F-FCT Dimension Scores

F-FCT Category	% exact	% 1 point adjacent	% 2 points adjacent	Cohen's K
Structures	75	25	—	.90***
Affect & Engagement	53.6	42.8	3.6	.43***
Talk & Language	58.3	41.7	—	.43***
Materials	66.7	33.3	—	.25
Opportunities for Development	65	35	—	.44***
Overall	66	33	1	

Note. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The process of the development of the tool provides qualitative evidence of a range of teacher practice during free choice time since it was based on observations in 26 classrooms (24 state- and federally-funded preschools and two classrooms in a university laboratory school), demonstrating a wide range of practice. The pilot in a different school district demonstrates quantitative validation of that range. The pilot provides some initial evidence that the tool is able to capture a range of teacher practice during FCT, a second scorer can be trained to use the tool in a way that is aligned with the first scorer, and this framework is aligned with a valid and reliable instrument. Just as the CLASS instrument provides a tool for articulating preschool teaching more generally (Burchinal et al., 2008), the F-FCT articulates a range of quality specifically during FCT.

Value of this Study

The vignettes that began this article illustrated some of the range of teacher practice during FCT. While a range of practice is to be expected in what is an undoubtedly complex enterprise (Pianta et al., 2008), there is evidence to support the notion that there are higher and lower quality ways to facilitate FCT in a preschool classroom. While the tool that was developed is philosophically

consistent with the CLASS, the F-FCT is uniquely suited to support and measure FCT. Given a lack of focus on this aspect of preschool curriculum and a concern that playtime is being reduced in favor of more "academically oriented" activities (Zigler, 2009), that support is timely. The F-FCT can be used to support teacher professional development. It also provides a means for self-evaluation and peer-evaluation using a common language, allowing teachers to set clear instructional goals.

The F-FCT offers a synthesis of the range of quality of FCT to the teacher preparation and professional development, research, and policy communities. A small piloting of the tool confirmed both that the F-FCT can capture a range of teacher practice across the tool's dimensions and that the range can be reliably measured across two scorers. Furthermore, correlations with the CLASS are encouraging in that the F-FCT seems to be measuring during FCT what the CLASS is measuring more generally in these classrooms, at least in terms of the CLASS measures of classroom organization and instructional support. This study provides some initial evidence that the F-FCT demonstrates reliability and validity such that further testing and honing of the instrument is worthwhile. The study also provides some evidence that free choice time is being facilitated inconsistently across classrooms, even within the same Head Start district.

Furthermore, concern has emerged across the board for children—but particularly for children who are at risk of not thriving in school due to the myriad negative effects of poverty; a curricular focus on academic outcomes is resulting in increases in teacher-directed instruction and the diminution of time for play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Bowdon, 2015). I suggest that play-based FCT has the potential to bring together authentic play and sought-after outcomes, at least for a block of time during each preschool day.

Limitations of this Study

Importantly, this study does not consider the outcomes of well-facilitated FCT for children. Work with this framework, including identifying classrooms where FCT is facilitated across a range of quality, could lead to the identification of particular outcomes for children. Those outcomes might be cognitive or academic, or they might involve motivation, self-regulation, or relational skills. Understanding how FCT affects children is a vital next step in this work.

Furthermore, this study does not consider in what ways well-facilitated FCT is related to a teacher's other instructional practices. The CLASS scores provide some evidence that teachers who facilitate high quality FCT are also facilitating the other portions of the preschool day in equally high-quality ways. If this is the case and specific training in FCT could shift teacher practice more generally, the F-FCT might have the potential to support more than just FCT. Again, further research is justified.

Finally, this study is limited by the fact that the observations that informed the descriptors and the observations that comprised the pilot were both in the same region of the U.S. and comprised an ethnic and linguistic population that is not necessarily representative of the U.S. population as a whole. It is possible that different geography might broaden or narrow the range of quality to be described across the tool. Yet again, further research is justified.

TABLE 5
Correlations Between F-FCT Dimension Scores and CLASS Scores (n=11)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Structures	—									
2. Engagement	.89**	—								
3. Teacher Talk/Language	.85**	.88**	—							
4. Materials	.86**	.89**	.89**	—						
5. Opportunities for Development	.91**	.95**	.84**	.81**	—					
6. Actual Average	.95**	.97**	.95**	.93**	.95**	—				
7. Holistic Score	.90**	.97**	.95**	.89**	.92**	.98**	—			
8. CLASS Emotional	.48	.36	.46	.20	.55	.44	.44	—		
9. CLASS Organization	.57	.54	.71*	.38	.62*	.61*	.67*	.87**	—	
10. CLASS Instruction	.64*	.75**	.71*	.55	.70*	.71*	.77**	.36	.64*	—

Note. *$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Future Directions

The F-FCT was carefully developed through classroom observations and consultation with the body of research, and initial reliability and additional elements of validity were demonstrated in a modest pilot. Further work could establish or question additional facets of validity and the reliability of the framework for consistent and meaningful evaluations of teacher practice.

This study provides a first step toward articulating what high-quality FCT entails. The F-FCT should be tested in a broader range of classrooms, both Head Start and elsewhere, in order to understand any generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, inter-rater agreement with additional scorers is warranted. In addition, it would be useful to look at both the context and the classroom demographics may be related to this quality rating. For example, how do teachers' beliefs, training, and practices during other parts of the preschool day relate to the quality of their FCT practice? How do student demographics, cultural practices, and parental beliefs relate to how teachers enact FCT? Finally, this tool can be used for professional development akin to what I observed in the highly-regarded university-based preschool, as a starting point for considering things like when to enter into play and when to stand back, how to support children as they negotiate with peers, how to create stimulating invitations to play, how to make materials engaging and accessible for all children, and how to talk to children during play. In sum, future work with this tool should tackle honing the implementation of the tool itself and using the tool to support teaching practice.

CONCLUSION

We know that play is important for children's development, and we know that high quality teaching is important for children's learning. What we do not yet know is how best to incorporate play into the preschool curriculum in order to optimize social, emotional, motivational, and academic outcomes while maintaining preschool as an enjoyable, developmentally appropriate space. This lofty goal is, perhaps, of particular import for children from families who may not have a choice in which preschool they attend.

There is good reason to believe that a block of gently guided free choice time is beneficial for all children. I have presented a framework for teacher practice during FCT. Tools like the CLASS have shown us that an articulated framework with practices spelled out clearly can provide support for preservice and in-service teachers alike. The F-FCT is a starting point for this work as it relates to FCT, meaning there is also the opportunity for teachers to critique the tool itself as a means of pushing their FCT practice.

It is possible that supporting teachers in facilitating FCT well could enhance their practice overall. The teachers I observed, like those depicted in the vignettes that began this paper, are hardworking individuals who want to do right by the children in their care. They are not always provided with the training or the means to do so, however. This framework, coupled with training on how to use it to support practice, has the potential to be a powerful tool. Given the probable benefits of a block of high-quality playtime for preschoolers and the likelihood that a block of high-quality playtime is not likely to do harm, the F-FCT provides an important foundation for further study of how teachers facilitate and support FCT.

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APPENDIX
Framework for Free Choice Time [F-FCT]

To use this framework as an observation tool:
1. Observe a full block of free choice time and take qualitative notes in the Evidence section.
2. Provide a Holistic Score that is your overall impression of the classroom with regard to free choice time.
3. Use the rubric and your notes to score each element.
4. Record scores on Reporting Form, averaging each individual score within the element to get the dimension score.

	Low range	**Middle range**	**High range**		
	1 2	**3 4 5**	**6 7**	**Score**	**Evidence**
STRUCTURES					
Choice	Teachers often regulate children's choices (or activities and/or play partners) and movement. These regulations impede children's choices and interfere with engagement.	Some of children's choice making (of activities and/or play partners) and movement is impeded in ways that impede optimal engagement.	Children are supported in choice making and movement in the classroom in a way that encourages/fosters optimal engagement. (i.e. In a high range classroom, children are generally free to move and make choices; the teacher's role is to support those choices rather than to regulate them.)		
Uninterruptedness	The block of free choice time includes frequent whole-class interruptions. These interruptions are generally random and not intended to foster engagement in play or	The block of free choice time includes some whole-class interruptions that may not be specifically intended to foster engagement in play (e.g. an interruption may	The block of free choice time is generally uninterrupted. Any interruptions of play focus are rare and are designed to foster engagement in playful learning and support children's growth.		

	to support the development of playful learning practice.	be purely management-oriented)			
Amount of time	<25 minutes	25-40 minutes	At least 40 minutes		EXACT # of minutes:
	Low range	**Middle range**	**High range**		
	1 2	**3 4 5**	**6 7**	**Score**	**Evidence**
AFFECT AND ENGAGEMENT					
Engagement/ Interest of Children	Many children are disengaged during the block of free choice time. There is a lot of wandering, and children may be involved in inappropriate activities.	There is some disengagement, but most of the children are engaged throughout most of the block of free choice time. There may be some "aimless wandering," but it is minimal.	All children are engaged throughout the block of free choice time. Transitions among activities are fluid and developmentally appropriate (e.g. a child may briefly explore a few choices before settling into an activity.)		
Engagement/ Interest of Teachers	Teachers are often not engaged with children and/or clearly uninterested or unenthusiastic about what children are engaged in.	Teachers are sometimes engaged with children. Teachers are sometimes interested in or enthusiastic about what children are engaged in.	All teachers are consistently engaged with children. Teachers are clearly interested in and/or enthusiastic about what children are engaged in.		
	Teachers are rarely warm with children or	Teachers are sometimes warm with children.	Teachers are consistently warm (i.e. smiling,		

	there are negative interactions.		proximate, playful) with children.		
	Children are seldom reinforced (or are rebuked) for trying something novel.	Children are sometimes reinforced for trying something novel.	Children are often reinforced for trying something novel.		
Atmosphere and Noise Level	The classroom feels unsafe and/or chaotic.	The classroom feels somewhat safe and organized.	The classroom feels safe and organized.		
	Consistently, the classroom is either completely silent or loud enough to be distracting.	There are moments where the noise level is too high or too low.	There is a buzz of activity. In other words, the noise level is high enough that it is clear there are interactions and engagement, but it is not so high that most children cannot concentrate		
	Low range	**Middle range**	**High range**		
	1 2	**3 4 5**	**6 7**	**Score**	**Evidence**
TALK AND LANGUAGE					
Talk Environment	Teacher often promotes talk that is unrelated to the content and activities in which children are engaged.	Teacher sometimes promotes talk related to the content and activities in which children are engaged.	Teacher consistently promotes talk related to the content and activities in which children are engaged.		

	Children's talk may be actively curtailed.	Children's talk may be neither encouraged nor discouraged.	Children's talk is actively encouraged.		
Talk Supporting Engagement and Cognitive Development	Teachers rarely, if ever, take opportunities to probe, discuss, and extend children's thinking.	Teachers sometimes take opportunities to probe, discuss, and extend children's thinking.	Teachers frequently take opportunities to probe, discuss, and extend children's thinking.		
Talk Specifically Supporting Language Development	Teachers rarely, if ever, model language that is developmentally appropriate for the child.	Teachers sometimes model language that is developmentally appropriate for the child.	Teachers consistently model language that is developmentally appropriate for the child. (i.e. challenging but accessible vocabulary and syntax.)		
	Even when appropriate, teachers rarely take up the opportunity to revoice children's speech.	When appropriate, teachers occasionally take up the opportunity to revoice children's speech.	Teachers generally take up the opportunity to revoice children's speech in appropriate ways.		
	Teachers rarely ask questions that will elicit developmentally appropriate language/responses from children.	Teachers sometimes ask questions that will elicit developmentally appropriate language/responses from children.	Teachers often ask questions that will elicit developmentally appropriate language/responses from children.		
	Low range	**Middle range**	**High range**		
	1 2	**3 4 5**	**6 7**	**Score**	**Evidence**
MATERIALS (e.g., art supplies like clay, paints, and craft materials; books; blocks, trains, and cars; dramatic play materials, dolls, and and realia; materials for games; sand and sand toys; puzzles; crayons, pencils, markers, and paper)					

Materials: Accessibility	Classroom materials are generally only accessible by adults.	Classroom materials are available, but some materials require procurement by an adult.	Classroom materials are easily accessible (within arm's reach) by all children.		
Materials: Amount and variety	There is little variety in the activities (or few materials to support an activity) in the classroom. (e.g. the teachers may have put out materials for two or three activities, but that is the extent of the variety)	There is some variety of activities (or materials that would support an activity) available in the classroom.	There is a vast amount and variety of activities (or materials that would support an activity) in the classroom.		
Use of the Materials	Many of the materials are intended to be used in a close-ended way.	Some of the materials are intended to be utilized in an open-ended way.	Most of the materials are intended to be utilized in an open-ended way.		
	Low range	**Middle range**	**High range**		
	1 2	**3 4 5**	**6 7**	**Score**	**Evidence**

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT					
Cognitive Development	There are few developmentally appropriate opportunities for cognitive development in literacy, mathematics, and science.	There are some developmentally appropriate opportunities for cognitive development in literacy, mathematics, and/or science.	There are varied developmentally appropriate opportunities for cognitive development for all children in literacy, mathematics, and/or science. These include opportunities for problem solving, planning, and higher-order thinking across the various activities.		
Social Development	There are few developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to express themselves and engage collaboratively in interactions geared toward social development.	There are some developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to express themselves and engage collaboratively in interactions geared toward social development.	There are varied developmentally appropriate opportunities for all children to express themselves and engage collaboratively in interactions geared toward social development.		
Fine Motor Development	There are few developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to develop fine motor skills.	There are some developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to develop fine motor skills.	There are varied developmentally appropriate opportunities for all children to develop fine motor skills.		

Gross Motor Development (e.g. engagement with big blocks, dressing oneself in dramatic play, movement with songs)	There are few developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to develop gross motor skills.	There are some developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to develop gross motor skills.	There are varied developmentally appropriate opportunities for all children to develop gross motor skills.		
Conflict Resolution	Teachers ignore conflicts and/or do not support children in resolving their own conflicts.	Teachers inconsistently support children in resolving their own conflicts.	Teachers consistently support children in resolving their own conflicts. (This includes modeling language appropriate for conflict resolution.)		

DIMENSION	Element	Score (1-7)
HOLISTIC	***Holistic Score:***	
STRUCTURES	**Choice**	
	Uninterruptedness	
	Time	
	Avg. Score for Structures:	
AFFECT & ENGAGEMENT	**Engagement/Interest: Children**	
	Engagement/Interest: Adults	**(a)**
		(b)
		(c)
	Atmosphere/Noise Level	**(a)**
		(b)
	Avg. Score for Affect/Engagement:	
TALK & LANGUAGE	**Talk Environment**	**(a)**
		(b)
	Talk Supporting Engagement	
	Talk Supporting Lang Dev't	**(a)**
		(b)
		(c)
	Avg. Score for Talk/Language:	
MATERIALS	**Accessibility**	
	Amount/Variety	
	Use	
	Avg. Score for Materials:	
OPPS FOR DEVELOPMENT	**Cognitive**	
	Social	
	Fine Motor	
	Gross Motor	
	Conflict Resolution	
	Avg. Score for Opportunities for Development:	
	Actual Average (Avg. of the Averages):	