The purpose of this participant selection model mixed methods study was to investigate early childhood education preservice teachers’ perceptions on play. The study was conducted at one of the Midwestern universities’ early childhood undergraduate education program in the United States. Within the program, 241 students at different stages (Cohort I, Cohort II, Cohort III, Cohort IV, and Cohort V) participated in the quantitative phase of the study. The quantitative results were used to select the 10 participants for the qualitative portion.

The survey results demonstrated that participants at earlier stages within the program are more inclusive toward play and the participants at the later stages perceive play in more rigid and strict ways. Qualitative findings showed that play as a concept does not have a shared meaning. The 10 interview participants, from five cohort groups, with relatively similar backgrounds and going through the same teacher education program defined play based on their own childhood experiences which vary from person to person. Thus, the preservice teachers’ preconceived images of play, that it is not related to formal learning, create mental barriers for connecting the concept of play to learning and development in early childhood. Study results indicate that preservice teachers leave teacher education programs with mixed beliefs and understandings about
how play relates to teaching, learning, and curriculum-making in early childhood classrooms.