The purpose of this study was to investigate parents’ perspectives of the designs of their children’s outdoor play environments and the factors they felt may influence the children’s learning and development. This study hoped to gain insight into what parents value in their children’s outdoor play environments, how they feel the design influences play, and to possibly encourage institutions to understand the parents’ knowledge and include their voices more when designing spaces. The in-depth research question was “What are parents’ perspectives of how the physical design of outdoor play environments may influence children’s play?”

Questions to consider:
1. What elements of outdoor play environments do parents find significant for their children’s spaces?
2. How included parents felt in the designing process of outdoor play environments?
3. What does an outdoor environment need to best support their children’s play?

Literature Review

The concept of “Free Play”
The level in which children are exposed to outdoor play environments may greatly impact the validity of calling outdoor play “free” play. As a result, environments that promote free play may also treat children as capable beings and provide opportunities to develop autonomy in their play. Freedom can be a sense of preparation and not being limited by constraints. Children who have been researched in these studies, may not promote the freedom to explore themselves, others, and the environment. As such, the research question aims to discover how parents feel their children’s outdoor play environments may influence children’s opportunities to play freely.

The Environment
Children have the innate ability to read environments to learn and navigate from them. As adults can learn to read environments the way children can they may use the environment as an ally to guide children’s learning (Callagan 2013). The way a play environment is set up may influence children’s desires to pursue challenges, discover learning opportunities and develop novel connections with the environment. However, children’s outdoor play environments may be limited to the environments provided by parents or peers. It is suggested by the literature, these designed environments may be manufactured, and how these environments are set for children may influence how children play (Beate & Sandseter, 2009).

Adult Influence
The literature identified how adults may have the ability to influence children’s play and may not discover how adult’s views may consciously or subconsciously influence children’s play (Tórada, Halmi & Kühnast, 2018, p. 172). Children may learn from other children and adults, they rely on socialization to enhance their play time, discover new ideas, and to increase the complexity of their learning. It could be argued that the literature suggested adults may need to consider their interactions with children and how they influence play in order to ensure that children are being supported in their learning. Children also need the freedom to explore their own environment. Consequently, this study investigates how parents feel their children’s play may be determined by how adults set up their environments.

Research Design
The research design is a case study as the prevailing interest is parents experiences with their children’s outdoor play. A case study is an in-depth exploration of bounded domains, individuals separated out in research in terms of time, place, or physical boundaries, based on extensive data collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Methodology
The instrument in which the researcher collected the data was through semi-structured individual interviews lasting fifteen minutes maximum with eleven official questions as followed:

1. Tell me about yourself and your child(ren).
2. What outdoor areas does your child play in?
3. How do you think your child differs in these areas?
4. What do you have in your outdoor area at home that is different from your child’s play area at school?
5. What characteristics do you consider when choosing outdoor play areas for your child?
6. What would you add or change in your outdoor area at home to create new ways to play?
7. What would you add or change in your child’s outdoor play area at school to create new ways to play?
8. Who do you feel has the most influence in the design of your child’s outdoor play area at school?
9. How do you feel you influence your child’s outdoor play experiences?
10. How might adult’s interactions with your child during outdoor play consciously or subconsciously influence how your child plays?
11. What do you feel an outdoor play environment needs to best engage your child in free play?

Procedure
Before recruitment for this study could occur, the researcher gained permission from Sheridan College Research Ethics Board.

Phase 1: Recruitment
Step 1: Researcher met with the study participants, gaining initial interests in participating in the study. Then obtained permission through signed informed Consent and Permission to Audio Record forms.

Phase 2: Data Collection
Step 1: The researcher met with participants on an agreed upon time, location and date.
Step 2: Before starting the interviews, purpose of the interview and consent were reviewed.

Reminders of confidentiality and voluntary participation were identified.

Step 3: Interview took place using the interview protocol as a guide.
Step 4: Participants were provided an opportunity to review and edit the transcripts before analysis.

Phase 3: Data Analysis
Step 1: Collected data will be transcribed line by line by researcher.
Step 2: Following a check with the participants, the researcher will read each transcript and conduct line-by-line analysis, using the coding process familiar to the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a systematic process that aims to generate theories and explain a concept or an interaction with a subjective (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The coding process familiar to grounded theory is as followed:

1. Open coding: dividing text into segments and labelling the segments with codes.
2. Axial coding: connecting codes to reduce overlap, creating themes from the grouped codes.
3. Selective coding: identifying the prominent themes to draw tentative conclusions from.

Participants
Participants for this study consisted of six mothers of children between the ages of four and seven, residing in the Halton Region. Participants were located through prior connections with the researcher from past placement opportunities, shared extracurricular activities, and from close neighbourhoods to the researcher. Participants were chosen using maximal variation sampling, participants with a differing variable or characteristic (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Variation for this study was the types of environments mothers provided for their children.

Results and Discussion
The Environment
Most participants reported finding unoppressed with the outdoor play environments at their children’s schools, one even stating their child’s outdoor area the “chicken coup” (participant 6, line 27). Participants described the outdoor environments at school to be too open and inappropriate for their children’s age. Participant 5 stated her child did not have opportunities to use a variety of skills due to a lack of materials and age restrictions for playground equipment (participant 5, line 30). The data may suggest that the quality of children’s play experiences may be influenced by the environment that is available. From the data collected some participants identified the difficulties children have in finding enjoyment when spending time outdoors and found it challenging to encourage children to play. Participant 1 even believed that the environment becomes boring when there are few opportunities to be creative from the environment provided (participant 1, line 17).

Interactions
From the data it may be suggested that children’s interactions with others has a significant effect on their outdoor play experiences. The participants stated that socializing with others greatly impacted their children’s interests when outdoors, how the children played, and what they learned. The data may show that interactions with others could be more influential than the physical design of outdoor environments on children’s play. It is also important to note that participants felt that adult’s interactions with the outdoors affects children’s interests with playing outdoors. Participant 4 identified that when adult shows a disinterest in the outdoors her children become disengaged from playing in the environment (participant 4, line 30). Interacting with others may encourage children to explore more outdoors, but too much direction may hinder children’s abilities to learn, grow and enjoy playing. One participant stated that it is important to know when to let children play on their own, as directing play too much can hinder children’s creativity (participant 1, line 48).

Conclusions
In conclusion, one may argue from the data that adults have a direct influence on children’s outdoor learning through prominence of values, providing resources and participating in play. The data may conclude that there is a potential to design spaces in consideration of children based on how adults notice children interacting. This study hopes to ignite the importance of outdoor play experiences and provide parents with the voice to coordinate with staff to design children’s outdoor spaces. Notably, it may be noted that this research is limited to the single interviews with each participant, therefore the data is limiting. Conclusions drawn do not reflect that of a population or the full experiences of participants. This study opens possibilities to further explore parent perspectives of outdoor play and the potential to triangulate future studies through using other methods of data collection. This study may lead to open communication between educators, parents and community members, and motivate further studies on the influence outdoor play environments may have on children’s learning.