Pre-K Teachers' and Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Kindergarten Readiness

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Abstract

Each year, millions of children partake in early childhood education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). While some states require kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2020), some children participate in early childhood programs before the formal schooling begins in elementary school (Pasquantonio, 2017). While many families choose to access ECE before kindergarten, there is still a glaring early achievement gap recognized within the kindergarten readiness process (Johnson, Ryan, & Brooks, 2012). However, there is a discrepancy among early childhood experts about what constitutes as kindergarten readiness for children entering kindergarten (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). The current study was designed to examine the perceptions of teachers from two specific sub-groups, pre-k and kindergarten teachers. The perceptions of pre-k and kindergarten teachers is important to this study to understand the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness with perceptions from teachers preparing students to go into kindergarten as opposed to teachers accepting students into kindergarten.

Three research questions guided the qualitative study and were designed to examine how teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness impact students' kindergarten experience. The questions focused on how teachers perceive kindergarten readiness, the connection between kindergarten readiness and learning standards, and the likelihood that teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness impact teaching strategies.

Four pre-k teachers and four kindergarten teachers participated in semi-structured individual interviews. The researcher transcribed the interviews and then sent to each participant for a member check. After the member checks were completed and

appropriate changes were made, the researcher proceeded to data analysis. For the data analysis, the researcher utilized a software program to code the transcribed interviews to identify common themes among all eight participants.

Data analysis offered five themes from the collected data, which led to four major findings. The researcher found that all teachers defined kindergarten readiness in a distinctive way, which supports previous research. In addition, participants from this study describe indicators of kindergarten readiness in various terms, but all agree that social-emotional skills play a major role in kindergarten readiness. Every participant affirmed that kindergarten readiness is connected to learning standards, although each had a differing view about how to use the learning standards. The last major finding indicated that every participant changed instructional strategies based on the teacher's perceptions of a student's readiness. The data analysis suggested that the majority of teachers utilize academic strategies more than social-emotional, and sometimes social-emotional learning is absent from lesson planning and curriculum, as noted by both pre-k and kindergarten teachers.

The current study added to the larger body of research about kindergarten readiness. Implications from the study suggest that educational systems at the state level can work to create a more unified and accepted definition of kindergarten readiness, while addressing the need for horizontal alignment of pre-k and kindergarten learning standards. School districts can ensure that administrators and teachers understand and properly use the kindergarten readiness assessments. The findings suggest that while teachers identify that social-emotional skills are necessary for kindergarten readiness, the assessment tool and the learning standards are more heavily focused on academics.

Indications are that schools should take responsibility for being ready for students rather than expecting students to be ready for school.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children, Alivia and Eliot. Everything that I do is to ensure they have a happy and a good life. I also dedicate this work to the field of early childhood education. This field of study chose me, and it first found me in my senior year of high school. Since then, I have made choices that would allow me to impact the profession in a significant way. Completing my doctoral dissertation will be another step towards a meaningful contribution.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Kindergarten is a rite of passage for families in America. While some states require kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2020), some children participate in early childhood programs before the formal schooling that begins in elementary school (Pasquantonio, 2017). Families often seek out educational experiences for young children before kindergarten; however, federal and state departments do not recognize pre-kindergarten (pre-k) as the beginning of formal education, as seen in the lack of funding for pre-k programs (Slutzky & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1993) defined early childhood education (ECE) as "any part- or full-day group program in a center, school, or home that serves children from birth through age eight, including children with special developmental and learning needs" (p. 2). ECE can be the educational foundation for students, if accessed by families.

All children can benefit from high-quality ECE, and it is especially important for children identified as at-risk for school failure (Johnson, Finch, & Phillips, 2019). In 2016, "Approximately 1.5 million children between the ages of 3-5 participated in early childhood programs" (Pasquantonio, 2017, para 8). High-quality ECE provides for hands-on learning experiences and play-based curriculum. Incorporating hands-on experiences into a play-based curriculum is an effective way to increase knowledge and understanding for students, especially in high-risk categories, such as low socio-economic status, single parent families, and history of substance abuse within the home (Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 2020). However, children from

high-risk groups, especially low-income families, are less likely to access high-quality early childhood education because of numerous and varied reasons (Johnson, Ryan, & Brooks, 2012).

With a national focus on closing achievement gaps, educational leaders have turned their attention to ECE programs (Rhor, 2014). ECE is an important structure to support and build a knowledge base and solid foundation for later school success in children (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). Pre-k teachers design high-quality classroom experiences to build a knowledge base by using educational outcomes and standards to create engaging and interactive learning activities to demonstrate mastery (Fonseca, 2016). Some experts have contended that high-quality pre-k programs can narrow the achievement gap among students in later grades. In one study, researchers found that "the poverty-level students who attended preschool scored proficient or above at a rate nearly double those of poverty-level students who did not attend preschool" (Slaby, Loucks, & Stelwagon, 2005, p. 54). When young children from at-risk groups do not participate in high-quality pre-k programs, it is more likely that they will miss crucial early learning opportunities (Ready & Chu, 2015). Thus, young children from at-risk groups who do not attend high-quality pre-k programs are likely to begin kindergarten with a learning deficit, or an early achievement gap (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Zambrana, Ogden, & Zachrisson, 2020). An early achievement gap could result in unfavorable kindergarten readiness outcomes.

The field of ECE encompasses the education of children from birth to age 8, both pre-k and kindergarten (Thompson, & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). ECE experts recommend, and relevant research has suggested, that best teaching practices for young

children are play-based and child-driven (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Pre-K teachers meticulously plan experiences to create opportunities for problem-solving, conflict resolution, and exploratory play (Bodrova & Leong, 2005), while kindergarten has increased academic focus in the past decades (Hustedt, Buell, Hallam, & Pinder, 2018). Upon examining kindergarten learning, Schliesman (2017) stated that current kindergarten structure is modeled on elementary school rather than pre-k programs. Although kindergarten is a within ECE, the focus in kindergarten classrooms is on content and skills rather than discovery and problem solving, which is contradictory to the developmentally appropriate practices of ECE (Costantino-Lane, 2021). The differing emphases of the two types of learning creates a potential for two distinct sets of kindergarten readiness expectations from pre-k and kindergarten teachers.

Background

In 2020, approximately 3 million children attended kindergarten in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). According to the state of Missouri, 11,707 students were enrolled (kindergarten to 12th grade) in District XYZ during the 2020-2021 school year, and 852 of those students were in kindergarten classrooms (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, n.d.). The state of Missouri enrolled 6,874 pre-k students in 2020 (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2020). During the 2020-2021 school year, District XYZ enrolled 174 pre-k students ([redacted], 2021).

School success for students is the goal of public education systems. However, there are still American students that are lacking educational success, as documented by the continued achievement gap (Henry, Betancur Cortés, & Votruba-Drzal, 2020). Some

experts believe that ECE could be one strategy for closing the achievement gap among students. Nelson (2006) stated, "Given the fact that the achievement gap is complex and difficult to close, the most obvious solution is prevention programming. This seemingly formidable task can be translated into a straightforward educational goal: school readiness for all young children" (para 2). Shapiro (2021) found that:

> a wealth of evidence shows that children who attend pre-k and other early childhood programs have higher pre-academic skills at kindergarten entry than those who don't attend, and the academic, social, and personal benefits of attending pre-k can last long into adolescence and adulthood. (p. 10)

Pre-k is not recognized as formal education like kindergarten, and is managed differently than kindergarten (Fowler, 2019). School readiness is often thought of as kindergarten readiness because kindergarten is the beginning of formal education for thousands of American children (Cappelloni, 2010). After three decades of research, there are still unanswered questions in the field of ECE. One such question is that of kindergarten readiness (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). Although there is a strong focus on educating young children, some students continue to enter kindergarten lacking readiness (Shapiro, 2021). There is a difference in the expectations at the end of pre-k and the expectations from educators when students enter kindergarten, as demonstrated by the vast differences in standards, learning objectives, and instructional activities.

While there are differences between expectations and standards, pre-k and kindergarten also have different requirements for teacher certification. An early childhood teaching license requires "specialized training in teaching young children" (p. 12), typically including up through 8-years old (Fowler, 2019). However, in as many

as 34 states, kindergarten teachers may hold an elementary teaching license rather than an early childhood teaching license, resulting in kindergarten classrooms full of young children without a teacher who received "specialized early childhood training" (Fowler, 2019, p. 12).

In addition, the funding for pre-k is drastically different than the funding for kindergarten. Fowler (2019) stated that "preschool is universally funded in three states, mandated in none, and taught by ECE licensed teachers only in 48 states; kindergarten is universally funded in all states, mandated in 15, and taught exclusively ECE licenses only in 17 states" (p. 14). La Paro, Rimm-Kaufman, and Pianta (2006) found that "the variability of kindergarten standards and policies across states contributes to the challenges of creating developmentally appropriate classrooms while simultaneously preparing children for the academic rigor of future grades" (p. 190). The misalignment of pre-k and kindergarten standards and expectations may enhance the phenomenon of early achievement gap and disparities in teacher perceptions.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown there can be a stark difference in the teaching expectations of pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). Although some studies have explored early childhood teachers and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness, there are limited data on the comparison of pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness. The lack of understanding about continuity between pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness inhibits alignment between pre-k and kindergarten.

Pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers could have dramatically different teacher preparation backgrounds, teaching and learning standards (which serve as guidelines for instruction), and in beliefs about what are appropriate educational practices for kindergarten students. All these components create a complex definition and understanding of kindergarten readiness, which provides structure for a misalignment of expectations from young children transitioning from pre-k to kindergarten.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to gain insight into the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness by investigating perceptions of kindergarten readiness from the view of pre-k and kindergarten teachers. The objective was to determine any similarities and differences in perceptions of kindergarten readiness of pre-k teachers (preparing to send students for kindergarten) versus kindergarten teachers (accepting new students into kindergarten classrooms). Ultimately, the movement between pre-k and kindergarten is a transition that can have an impact on student achievement. Atchison and Pompelia (2018) found the following:

> Successful coordination between preschool and kindergarten helps to lay the groundwork for a child's positive school experience. If this transition does not go well, children can be turned off to learning and school at an early age. By aligning standards, curricula, instruction and assessments between preschool and kindergarten, children can experience a seamless pathway that sets them up for future success. (p. 2)

The comparison of pre-k and kindergarten perceptions provided insight into the transition of students from pre-k to kindergarten and was made to gain a better understanding of future curricular alignment as children move from pre-k to kindergarten.

The study was designed to allow the researcher to investigate the differences between early childhood educators' perceptions of kindergarten readiness and expectations for mastery of skills compared to kindergarten teachers' required learning objectives, their perceptions on kindergarten readiness, and expectations of required skills for incoming kindergarten students. The three research questions served as a guide for the study for better understanding of the commonalities and the dissimilarities between pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness for young children.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the body of research on kindergarten readiness, and the findings could guide early childhood educators' instructional practices. The research suggests there is a discrepancy in understanding about kindergarten readiness entering kindergarten between pre-k and kindergarten teachers (Cappelloni, 2010). Understanding their perceptions could add to the research base about kindergarten readiness and improve teaching practices. When teachers understand the reasons for the desired outcomes, they are more equipped to create meaningful educational experiences. Meaningful learning experiences could produce stronger educational foundations for young students. La Paro et al. (2006) found that "research that studies the school readiness and the quality of children's classroom experience points to the importance of classroom practices in relation to children's school performance" (p. 191).

In order to study teachers' perceptions, the researcher designed a qualitative study. Lemon and Hayes (2020) stated that qualitative research is valuable because it "captures people's actual lived experiences, which leads to an in-depth and robust understanding of phenomena" (p. 604). An analysis of the qualitative data could help to generate a better understanding and knowledge of what educational systems are using to measure readiness. In addition, the study could show commonalities to support both pre-k and kindergarten students in the future. Awareness of misalignment between pre-k and kindergarten educational experiences could assist school districts to create a cohesive transition from pre-k to kindergarten; thus, leading to high-quality kindergarten classrooms, and possibly reducing the early achievement gap.

Delimitations

The researcher limited the participant sample to pre-k and kindergarten teachers because they have direct connection to kindergarten readiness, albeit from different viewpoints. All teachers were staff members within one school district located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. The researcher limited the data collection to individual semi-structured interviews with the teachers, as each individual teacher would participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. All the interviews were conducted within the third quarter of the 2021-2022 school year.

Assumptions

Throughout the completion of the study, the researcher made assumptions, which could impact the study's findings. First, the researcher assumed that the interviewed teachers understood the questions and answered the questions honestly and with integrity. The researcher also assumed that the teachers had background knowledge and

understanding of kindergarten readiness, as well as common language used among ECE professionals. In addition, the researcher assumed that all teachers were qualified and certified in his or her current teaching assignments.

Research Questions

These research questions directed the study:

RQ1. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness?

RQ2. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of early learning standards and kindergarten standards related to kindergarten readiness?

RQ3. How do pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of student kindergarten readiness affect their instructional strategies?

Definition of Terms

Throughout the study, the researcher used terms and phrases that are familiar and easily recognized within the education realm. In the following section, the researcher described the key terms with concise definitions to support the reader's understanding of throughout the study.

Developmentally appropriate practice. Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez (2021) stated that developmentally appropriate practices are designed to pay "careful attention to two core considerations: young children's most typical ages and stages of development (their commonalities) and each child's unique developmental needs (their individuality)" (p. 20). Developmentally appropriate practices are teaching strategies and methodologies specific to the pedagogy of young children.

Early childhood education. Fowler (2019) stated that "early childhood is widely recognized as a distinct phase of human development, extending from birth through age eight, during which children develop important physical, social-emotional, and cognitive skills" (p. 12); thus, early childhood education (ECE) is the pedagogical term for schooling for children up to third grade. Both pre-k and kindergarten are considered ECE.

High-quality. Every state and all school districts define "high-quality" in different terms. A high-quality preschool program can be defined as "an early learning program that includes structural elements that are evidence-based and nationally recognized as important for ensuring program quality" (Fonseca, 2016, p. 1). The structural elements include, but are not limited to, low teacher to student ratios, correct staff qualifications, caring adults, enriched and safe environments, class size limits, and developmentally appropriate curricula and assessments (Flores, Curby, Coleman, & Melo, 2016).

Kindergarten. According to Hustedt, Buell, Hallam, and Pinder (2018), kindergarten is the earliest grade in American formal education within elementary schools. In most states, kindergarten continues to be an option for families, but it is not required in every state (Hinton, 2018). Kindergarten teachers can hold either an EC or elementary teaching credentials since kindergarten students fall within both the EC (ages birth to age 8) and elementary range (ages 5 to 11) (Fowler, 2020). It is important to note that there are variations among states regarding the requirements for teaching credentials for pre-k and kindergarten teachers.

Kindergarten Readiness. Cross (2017) stated that "school readiness is a complex, multidimensional concept in which children's health, development, and experience are interrelated" (p. 3). Kindergarten readiness is a term that can be interchanged with school readiness. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 2006), a national teacher's union, described kindergarten readiness as a set of indicators and desired skill sets, within various developmental domains, that identify if a child is ready for kindergarten.

Pre-k. Jenkins et al. (2018) stated that pre-k is designed for children ages three to five. Pre-k teachers often use specialized "curricula to guide their classroom learning activities" (Jenkins et al., 2018, p. 339). Pre-K is educational programming for young children, usually taught by qualified teachers and teacher assistants (NAETCE, 2009). Teachers must hold a specialized early childhood certification to teach pre-k, although not all programs require a 4-year college degree and state license to teach children ages three to five (Fowler, 2020).

Organization of the Study

The current study is a phenomenological qualitative study. The researcher designed the study to gain a better understanding of perceptions about kindergarten readiness. The study contains five chapters. In Chapter 1, the researcher presented an introduction to the study, including but not limited to the introductory paragraphs, demographic and background information, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, the significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, the study's research questions, the definition of noteworthy terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter 2 is a review of literature related to the study topic, including a history of early childhood

education, the importance of high-quality pre-k experiences, and kindergarten readiness's educational impact. Chapter 3 is an explanation of the study methodology, including research design information, data collection procedures and instruments, information about data analysis, a statement on reliability and trustworthiness, an explanation of the researcher's role, and limitations. Chapter 4 is a description of the study results, including detailed information about each finding based on the research questions. Chapter 5, the final chapter, contains an interpretation of the results and recommendations for future research. The final chapter also details the implications for action and concluding remarks based on the study's central components.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Chapter 2 is organized as an outline of the historical background of ECE and kindergarten readiness as a literature review. ECE was implemented in America nearly two centuries and has seen many changes (Hewes, 1992). Throughout the years, various laws and educational policies emerged that impacted ECE and beginning of formal education for young children, some which created misalignments and early achievement gaps, still seen today (Cross, 2017). Developmentally appropriate practices and high-quality experiences have been shown to combat discrepancies among student success but are often missing from kindergarten classrooms (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008).

Language and literacy development, proper nutrition, and social-emotional learning are all key components of high-quality early life experiences required for later school success (Flores et al., 2016). However, teachers' perceptions of the early experiences, or lack thereof, can influence a child's entrance into kindergarten through implementation of learning standards and instructional strategies based on students' level of readiness (Raftopoulous, 2009). While the definition and components of what makes a child ready or not for kindergarten are still debated among educational experts, research has shown that teacher perceptions can play a key role in a child's school success (Janus & Offord, 2007).

History of Kindergarten Readiness

Throughout the course of American history, leaders and legislative bodies have changed and altered the educational system. One of the most controversial topics in education, and one of the most modified, is the process established to begin formal schooling. Within the last twenty years, "the issue of children's readiness for school

finally reached the forefront of interest not just among academics and educators, but also communities and politicians" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 2). The heightened interest also brought about the controversy of kindergarten readiness.

However, child development pedagogy provides knowledge that not every child develops at the same rate or in the same sequential order. Maxwell and Clifford (2004) stated that "children are not innately ready or not ready for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through interactions with other people and environments before coming to school" (p. 1). Additionally, the developmental sequence and time frame for each child is varied and dependent on an assortment of factors. Regenstein, Connors, Romero-Jurado, and Weiner (2018) wrote that "young learners develop skills and abilities across all of these developmental domains in a highly interrelated manner, building confidence and expertise as new competencies are mastered" (p. 39). Child development is a complex string of events based on experiences and interactions, which vary for every individual; thus, making it difficult to determine readiness for a particular age or grade.

Historically, individual states have determined the legal age for children to begin school. In the early stages of kindergarten readiness assessment, schools would deny entry to kindergarten based on the results of the assessments. However, as Maxwell and Clifford (2004) stated, that "it is the school's responsibility to educate all children who are old enough to legally attend school, regardless of their skills" (p. 2).

According to Snow (2015), only 15 of 50 states require kindergarten education and no states require preschool education, demonstrating that each state has different expectations and value of early childhood education. The difference in what is expected

and valued about early childhood education in each state highlights the basis for discrepancies among kindergarten readiness expectations. Although communities have a responsibility to "provide high-quality health care and support services for families with young children and work to ensure that all families with young children have access to high-quality care and education" (p. 2), states disagree with the how and when to grant access to care and education for young children (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004).

Implications for Differing Definitions

There is no standardized definition of kindergarten readiness, and different stakeholders have unique perceptions about the meaning of kindergarten readiness. Various entities use the term "kindergarten readiness" to describe where students fall on a continuum for success in kindergarten. Cross (2017) stated that "school readiness is a complex, multidimensional concept in which children's health, development, and experience are interrelated" (p. 3). Sultzkey and DeBruin-Parecki (2019) stated that the field of early childhood education (ECE) "still has not adopted a common, developmentally appropriate readiness definition to guide preparation of all young children for school" (p. 1).

Thus, the challenge to define readiness is exacerbated by the reality that there is a "high variability in what is considered the 'normal range' of development and that the rate at which early learners acquire new concepts and skills varies significantly among children" (Regenstein et al., 2018, p. 39). In 2007, more than 37 states had some type of early learning standards or guidelines (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). By 2019, The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance had reported that all 50 states, along with the District of Columbia, had early learning standards for children 3 years old

and older (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2019). While legislators and policy makers continue to revise early childhood education guidelines, there are not two identical definitions or measurement criteria for kindergarten readiness. Each state, and possibly every district in the nation, determines how and what defines kindergarten readiness for their student population. Kokkalia, Drigas, Economou, and Roussos (2019) confirmed the complex nature of kindergarten readiness and stated

> As many researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers have defined it, school readiness implies that by the time children enter kindergarten they have achieved a level of development that makes it likely that they will successfully adapt to the challenges of formal schooling. Whether intended or not, this concept implies that an important objective for the early childhood years is to ensure that young children achieve a state of readiness before they enter grade school. In practice, however, this objective has proven difficult to achieve. Every year, large numbers of children have difficulty adapting to grade school, and these data make it clear that there is considerable variation in the extent to which young children are prepared for formal schooling. Most often, deviations from this implied norm are attributed to differences in children's rearing conditions (e.g. poverty, violence in the community or home, inadequate or dysfunctional socialization), health (developmental delays, disabilities, injuries, chronic illness), inherited characteristics (e.g. ability, temperament, personality), and various combinations of these factors. (p. 5)

While the definition of kindergarten readiness is abstract, defining the concept has consequences for future school assessments and instructional considerations.

Miller and Kehl (2019) stated that historically, kindergarten readiness tasks were based on a predetermined skill set in a variety of developmental areas designed to verify that a child can conform to school and classroom expectations. Initially, readiness tasks were designed to identify kindergarten age students who were not ready for school. For example, "in the first half of the 20th century, assessment of school readiness was virtually synonymous with decision-making for kindergarten entry or delay" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p.2). Skill based assessments were given to children before they were enrolled in elementary school, assuming all children develop at the same rate.

The "idealist/nativist view of readiness can be seen as a within-the-child phenomenon" (p. 2); thus, the assessment would look at skills "through a maturational process, with little or no impact from the environment" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 2). School administrators would determine who could enter kindergarten based on the skills acquired prior to school. "In the early formulations, it was an ability to perform indicated skills, usually cognitive, language, or motor tasks on demand," which force children to be prepared to enter formal educational programs (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 2). The maturational theory of development "led to the creation of developmental tests, which were validated and reviewed for accuracy, and were commonly used to identify children at-risk for school failure" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 3).

Kindergarten readiness assessment tools paralleled the kindergarten readiness assessment process. The majority of the current screening tools are too cumbersome and time-consuming and can require one-on-one attention that a kindergarten teacher does not have. Stormont, Herman, Reinke, King, and Owens (2015) stated that "there is a need for more efficient, user-friendly screening items that can accurately predict a range of student

outcomes over times because schools administer many assessments a year" (p. 214). Assessment tools, including kindergarten readiness assessment tools, serve a purpose, and the chosen design is an illustration of the desired outcome.

History of Early Childhood Education

ECE is relatively young, with the first known kindergarten program beginning less than 200 years ago. The beginnings of ECE stemmed from the brilliant Swiss educational philosopher Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Europe in the 1800s. Hewes (1992), a historical writer, stated that "Pestalozzi is usually considered to be the modern educator who most influenced his contemporaries and the public attitudes about classrooms in which the children and teachers both initiate and respond" (p. 5). His instruction method was unique to the times, as Pestalozzi focused on strengthening both cognitive and social skills in his students (Horlacher, 2011).

Other educators traveled across Europe to study with Pestalozzi, adapting his theories and methods to other forms of education. One such educator was German educator named Froebel. In the mid-19th century, Friedrich Froebel discovered his passion for education. After his initial teaching assignment, Froebel credited Pestalozzi as a key inspiration and influence for his conception of his educational theories and philosophies (Adelman, 2000). His educational philosophy led to the creation of kindergarten, a

> term [that] refers to the work of the educator with children since, just as a gardener tends the plants that will grow to their full splendour in the garden, so he or she must tend the children in their care, guiding the development

so that they develop their natural innate faculties (Marín Murcia & Martínez Ruiz-Funes, 2020, p. 200).

Prior to "Frobel's kindergarten, children under the age of seven did not attend school. It was believed that young children did not have the ability to focus or to develop cognitive or emotional skills before this age" (Scholastic, 2000, para 6). However, Froebel took some of Pestalozzi's philosophies and applied them to young children. Froebel theorized that children learn through play, they are led by their own interests and should freely explore those interests, utilize systemized play, and learn through social imitation. His classrooms were built on foundational principles centered on the idea that "creativity and play are crucial aspects of young children's learning and development" (Murray, 2018, p. 217). These philosophical principles led to a kindergarten schooling of young children, ages three to seven, that included simple activities that develop into more complex games, gifts or educational toys, songs, fingerplays, and strategies to learn through expression (Scholastic, 2000).

After being established in Europe, kindergarten came to America with Germans fleeing the wars in Europe in the1840s. Bostonian Elizabeth Peabody, who was involved with Infant Schools in Boston in the 1820s, was credited with opening the first English kindergarten in America around 1860 (Hewes, 1992). The American establishment of kindergarten was also when the beginning of change in early childhood educational philosophies. Peabody did not agree with Froebel's philosophy in entirety and began to create a model that she felt would fit better for American children (Hewes, 1992; Swiniarski, 2004). The changes to the programing took control, and the powers to make educational decisions, away from the parents and students, which increased the need for

and the control of the teacher. These were the first Americanized changes to kindergarten and would not be the last.

As early as 1903, debates started surrounding the principles of kindergarten and ECE. In its original form, kindergarten is directed by the child, focused on allowing children to freely play, and guided by specially trained teachers (Swiniarski, 2004). Kindergarten saw major shifts in the mid-1910s. Teachers had more sections of classes and, thus, less parental and family interaction. Subject areas became part of the curriculum for the first time, and there is a focus on the child's daily life and schedule. In addition, most large cities had created kindergarten programs, and women are beginning to receive training in ECE (Schaub, 2016).

In the 1920s, a behavioral emphasis took over the education realm. In addition, researchers became interested in ECE, which led to measuring kindergarten students' learning the "quality of teaching" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 85). Patty Smith Hill was part of the movement away from Froebel's kindergarten design. The changes she implemented created a loss of social-emotional focus from teachers, and she developed new toys and activities, with new philosophical foundation, influenced heavily by the work of John Dewey (Liebovich, 2020). The shift to standardization and measurement in ECE paralleled the educational focus in elementary and secondary schools.

As kindergarten and EC experiences in schools have changed, so have the student expectations within the classroom. Goldstein (2008) stated that:

> changing expectations have caused many kindergarten teachers to struggle with a disjuncture between their philosophical beliefs and knowledge about best teaching

> practices for young children and their requirement to teach the increasingly structured and narrow curricula dictated by local school districts. (p. 224)

The current and modified expectations and standards in early learning produced a broadened achievement gap during kindergarten. More so, some research indicates that inaccurate kindergarten teacher perceptions may be more detrimental to student achievement compared to family income (Ready & Chu, 2015).

The Creation of Pre-k

As kindergarten experiences changed the EC landscape, pre-k programs for children aged 3-5 also changed. Pre-k programs originated from a variety of societal and cultural changes. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a war on poverty while America was focused on civil rights (Hinitz, 2014). Part of President Johnson's strategy included the creation of Head Start program which "was built on a strong base of civil rights advocacy and a long history of private and government funded US early childhood education programs" (Hinitz, 2014, p. 94). Head Start emerged as a program to focus on early intervention for children in low-income families, and it played a dual role through early identification of at-risk indicators and the creation of community involvement.

Parents, especially mothers, were expected to invest time and talent into the programs; thus, the governing board created "Head Start Performance Standards" to hold parents accountable for involvement (Hinitz, 2014, p. 95). Published studies have "triggered major revisions to the program" (Hinitz, 2014, p. 96), and as of 2022, Head Start continued to function as a viable option for many low-income families looking for free early childhood education.

While the creation of Head Start was a response to the Civil Rights Movement, all students, not only minority students, benefit from universal ECE. Duncan and Sojourner (2013) examined the effect of income-based and universal early childhood programs for children three to five years old. The report showed that "at age three, at the end of the program, income-based gaps would be essentially eliminated with either a universal or income -based targeted program" (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013, p. 962). Ayler (2007) stated that "early childhood programs, more than elementary programs, fostered the development of the whole child and the development of communities of learners rather than classrooms full of children" (p. 1). Finocchiaro (2016) stated that "the EC years are likely the most critical stage for learning and thus it is imperative we have the most comprehensive understanding of this period" (p. 104). Across the decades, parents of all socio-economic classes wanted a solid education foundation for their children.

Members of society, especially parents, reasoned that if ECE improved IQ scores for disadvantaged children, all children would equally benefit from ECE. In 1979, *A Nation at Risk* was published and litigation against school whose graduated seniors could not read ensued, which resulted in intensified curriculum and mandated achievements expectations, and "consequently, the curriculum and methods previously used in the elementary grades were pushed down into the primary grades and kindergarten" (Ayler, 2007, p. 1). Thus, instructional strategies and expectations from upper elementary grades were pushed down into kindergarten.

While research has demonstrated mixed results, Head Start continued to expand programs throughout the United States and increased the academic demands on young childrene. The demand for increased academic EC focus caused "early childhood to lose

its stress-free, play-based process when research findings pointed to the effectiveness of Head Start in raising IQ scores, improving attitudes about schooling, and reducing dropouts." (Ayler, 2007, p. 1). The pressure from lawmakers and administration to push-down elementary skills into pre-k bled into funding changes and altered DAP expectations.

Federal Government Funding of Public Education

The federal government has been creating educational policies for decades. President Johnson approved legislation that funded Head Start and then passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Kilty, 2015). The ESEA has been reauthorized numerous times. One of the most recent reauthorizations of ESEA was No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While NCLB included early childhood programs in the programming, there was extensive controversy in the *Reading First* grants, especially with regards to financial ties to major publishing firms (Ayler, 2007; Marcon, 2002). Without provisions or adequate funding, NCLB required districts to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all students, ensuring that all students met or exceeded grade level expectations no matter their incoming mastery level.

The *Reading First* program promoted direct phonics instruction in early childhood classrooms, without data or research to support curriculum (Gamse, Bloom, & Kemple 2008; Giles & Tunks, 2015). Goldstein (2008) stated that "the demands linked to NCLB have posed significant professional challenges for teachers at all grade levels" (p. 233). Direct phonics instruction is not supported as a DAP by NAEYC and would be considered a hindrance to EC teachers.

NCLB proved to be a futile attempt at education reform based on the high-stakes requirements and funding shortage. During his presidency, former Barack Obama outlined a new initiative, known as Race to the Top (RTTT), to invest over $4.3 billion into American educational systems (U. S. Department of Education, 2009). The massive proposal touted that to improve the education system, policies should ensure teaching and learning improvements, raising standards, aligning policies and structures, effectively using data, and implementing effective (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.).

All grades from pre-k to 12th grade, as well as higher education, received money from RTTT. In 2012, the federal government, through the U. S. Department of Education, invested over $400 million in RTTT policies. Former President Obama was outspoken on the importance of EC and included the Preschool for All initiative within RTTT policy (Rhor, 2014). The Preschool for All funding included all 50 states and set funding towards low- to moderate-income families. The goal was to ensure that all 4-year-old children had access to high-quality education (Rhor, 2014). Within the stipulations, each state was to accept the guidelines of the program and establish a plan to meet the guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Then, the U.S. Department of Education would allocate monies base on the percentage of low- to moderate-income students each state served. In theory, it was a meaningful proposal, but the program was never fully funded, and incentives did not motivate teachers (Rhor, 2014). To date, RTTT has never come to fruition and federal educational opportunities and initiatives have been given back to the state governments (U.S. Department of Education, n. d.).

Thus, the situation remains that high-quality ECE is foundational, but still unsupported by key players in educational policy decisions. Since the 1970s, research

has documented the crucial role of developmentally appropriate ECE (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). The Abecedarian project, the Perry Preschool project, and the Chicago Child- Parent Center project identified numerous societal benefits for the students, as well as a high return on investment for money spent on high-quality EC experiences (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013).

Marcon (2002) echoed the findings and stated that "Children's later school success appears to be enhanced by more active, child-initiated learning experiences." (p. 19-20). Research has shown that at the end of fifth grade there are noted differences in academic achievement based on the instruction style of preschools (Marcon, 2002). Ayler (2007) found that "Children who had preschool experiences more academically directed earned significantly lower grades compared to children who attended child-initiated preschool classes" (p. 2).

Early Achievement Gap

The recent federal legislation has spotlighted ECE as component, possible major component, to school success. Early experiences are foundational to future school success and experts have identified an achievement gap early in life (Hartman, Winsler, & Manfra, 2017). As early as preschool "children from low-income families do not fare as well academically – less likely to recognize letters, count to 20 or higher and write name – as children from more advantaged families" (Stormont, et al., 2015, p. 215). The number of high-quality experiences that young children have is a direct correlation to if children are kindergarten ready.

Additionally, "existing literature suggests that early academic and behavior problems are readily identifiable markers of risk for future academic and social failure"

(Stormont, et al., 2015, p. 213). Kindergarten readiness assessment, when administered purposefully, could identify early academic and behavior problems. Finocchiaro (2016) stated that:

> The experiences in the early years of a child's life can have meaningful effects on his later achievement. This is especially true for those children who come from low socio-economic families in that they fall in the low performing end of the low-income achievement gap (p. 100).

Stormont et al. (2015) also stated that "Children who are living in poverty are at a higher risk for struggling in transition to kindergarten, academic and behavioral deficits that would interfere with school success" (p. 225).

While socio-economic status is one indicator of school success, data suggests that ethnicity may also indicate possible achievement gaps. Researchers have found that black children begin formal education with fewer skills and less life experience (Covay, 2010; Zane, 2009). Other minorities, including Hispanic children, experience poverty at a higher rate, and experience an early achievement gap upon entering pre-k or kindergarten (Gardea, 2020).

High-Quality Early Childhood Experiences

Children with increased risk factors are most vulnerable to begin school with an identifiable achievement gap. Jenkins et al. (2018) stated that "research suggests that not all curricula are equally effective at boosting children's early skills; some preschool curricula generate significantly more learning gains when compared with 'business as usual' preschool classroom activities" (p. 339). During early childhood, high-quality pre-k programs can be one of the central ways that children gain interactions with the world,

thus, encouraging development. The goal for increased funding in pre-k and higher quality pre-k programs is to create an early educational system that develops all children into students ready for future school success. Policy makers and educational leaders do acknowledge the benefits. Since 2013, federal, state, and local agencies have increased pre-k funding by 47% (Education Commission of the States, 2020). The increase in funding demonstrates that policymakers and stakeholders understand the value of high-quality pre-k programs.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

EC is the time in a child's life between birth to age eight (Fowler, 2019). Thus, kindergarten students fall within the EC developmental period. However, there is a division between content standards in kindergarten and DAP for young children. "Furthermore, as another result of accountability shove down, kindergarten teachers are contending with unprecedented levels of regulation and imposition" (Goldstein, 2008, p. 223). While kindergarten is traditionally situated in elementary schools, EC principles and pedagogy are still relevant and necessary for young children for maximum impact on student. School for 3- to 5-year-olds is carefully and specifically designed for hands-on, student-directed learning experiences. Ayler (2007) noted that "early childhood programs have focused on the active involvement of children in sensory and concrete learning activities appropriate to their level of development" (p. 1), which seems to disappear in elementary classrooms.

Kindergarten teachers are inhibited from utilizing DAP and instructional strategies, such as play, sensory, and art experiences, due to the inappropriate and rigid standards and outcomes set by state and district regulations. Additionally, kindergarten

teachers may not be trained in specific pedagogy for young children. NAEYC (1993) has recognized that "kindergarten is specified under both early childhood or elementary education teacher certifications in some states. Often, state teacher licensure (certification) requirements do not fully address the specialized skills, knowledge, and supervised practicum experience of work with younger children" (p. 3).

Goldstein (2008) stated that

> Because state-mandated content standards for kindergarten specify the knowledge and skills children are expected to master prior to entering first grade, many kindergarten teachers working in standards-based settings no longer have the opportunity to choose curricular topics based on the needs and interests of their students. (p. 224)

Thus, if kindergarten falls within the realm of early childhood education (where student-directed, play-based instruction is imperative), standards-based curriculum choices would not be developmentally appropriate for kindergartners.

While social-emotional learning is important to the development of the whole child, there is still the need for academic learning. Copple and Bredekamp (2008) stated that "curriculum focused on social-emotional development without attention to cognitive development." (p. 55) could lead to bad teaching practices; thus, there is a necessity for both academic instruction and social-emotional learning opportunities.

Importance of Early Life Experiences

Developmentally appropriate practices directly impact the quality and number of experiences children have. Research has shown that young children develop at different rates, and that life experiences can influence the rate and the type of development for

each child (Pianta et al., 2020), which has major implications for students from low-income families. Research has indicated that "in the United States, socioeconomic status (SES) has been associated with differences in early childhood outcomes spanning a wide range of developmental domains, including physical, socioemotional, and cognitive" (DeFlorio & Beliakoff, 2015, p. 320). Children from low SES families have fewer life experiences (Hyde et al., 2020); thus, have fewer opportunities for brain development and the creation of a foundation of skills. The differences in life experiences appear in the pre-k classrooms and create the first achievement gap among students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), "children of color from low-income families are less likely to be in high-quality programs or not enroll in preschool at all" (p. 5). Unfortunately, children from low SES homes also are more likely to attend lower quality pre-k programs and less likely to make up for deficits in early experiences. Bassok and Galdo (2016) stated that "disparities in observed quality across classrooms may have meaningful implications for the learning opportunities of children in lower income communities" (p. 140). In general, the findings from Bassok and Galdo (2016) imply that high-quality programs were found in more affluent zip codes, while programs in low SES zip codes had pre-k programs with less instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization from teachers.

Importance of Social-Emotional Learning

Young children require high-quality experiences during critical developmental periods before and during kindergarten (Moran & Moir, 2018; Perry, 2019). Experiences lead to brain development and prior knowledge. A major component of ECE and high-quality experiences is social-emotional (SE) learning. "The evidence from research on

self-regulation suggest it is a strong predictor of children's early adjustment to and achievement in school, but also links self-regulation to positive and negative outcomes through adolescence and adulthood" (Perry, 2019, p. 328). The more experiences a child has before the age of 5, the more extensive the child's SE inventory skills, with self-regulation being an important SE skill.

Nationwide, EC learning standards include SE objectives, including self-regulation skills, sharing, play skills, turn-taking, and respect for others (DeBruin, & Slutzky, 2016). When young children come into formal elementary education without a pre-k experience, kindergarten teachers take responsibility for teaching social-emotional skills. However, this is not typically part of the kindergarten curriculum because it is not standards-based and there is no time allotted within instructional time for non-academic subjects. Researchers has found that kindergarten teachers report that children who struggle in the development of self-regulation have difficulty following directions, completing academic tasks, managing emotions, and relating positively to peers. (Perry, 2019; Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).

Language and Literacy Development

As with SE, communication is a vital aspect of educational success for all students. Literacy development consists of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and is imperative to early experiences and later school success. EC educators embrace early literacy development in numerous ways. According to Reed and Lee (2020) early literacy strategies include:

- read stories aloud to children
- speak to children in conversations and model language through self-talk
- surround children with a variety of toys
- expose children to different types of books and print material
- encourage play, including pretend play, sensory experiences, and art activities

Reed and Lee (2020) stated that "early childhood oral development can positively or negatively influence a child's ability to learn language and develop literacy skills." (p. 9). Researchers have also found that "children from low-income home hear significantly less language directed to them compared to those in higher income homes." (Golinkoff et al., 2019, p. 987). It has been estimated that "3-year-old children to parents with professional background have been exposed to 30 million more words than 3-year-old children whose families are on welfare, and twice as many as those who would be defined as working class" (Moran & Moir, 2018, p. 51).

Additionally, income disparities seen amongst kindergarten vocabulary skills indicate achievement gap in later elementary (Golinkoff et al., 2019). "Income disparities found in vocabulary skills in kindergarten are the main reason for the income achievement gap in later academic skills" (Durham, Farkas, Hammer, Tomblin, & Catts, 2007; Golinkoff et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated the importance of understanding the correlation between vocabulary skills and later academic skills since the amount of language and the quality of the vocabulary that young children hear are the basis of their foundational oral language skills (Santos, Fettig, & Shaffer, 2012).

Golinkoff et al. (2019) stated that “kindergarten language scores, which are deeply rooted in the language development of infants and toddlers, are the single best predictor of school achievement in all subjects in third and fifth grade” (p. 985). Thus, vocabulary and language scores are lower in children from low socio-economic homes, while early language and literacy skills are accurate indicators for later school success. Giles and Tunks (2015) stated that “there is concern that the emphasis on reading instruction in early childhood is curtailing valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts” (p. 525). Giles and Tunks (2015) found that many early childhood educators practice emergent literacy, a literacy approach inspired by educational theorists such as Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Emergent literacy is the ability to learn language through natural exploration in play and social connections and is described as best practice in ECE (Giles & Tunks, 2015).

Emergent literacy approach is a stark contrast to direct phonics instruction (utilized by the Obama administration and encouraged by RTTT), which focused on direct instruction, drills, and teaching isolated letter sounds and skills (Helm & Katz, 2010; Giles & Tunks, 2015). Increased governmental accountability through funding programs in education has led to more direct instruction in earlier grades (Bodrova & Leong, 2005), which is the “the direct opposite of developmentally appropriate practices that have become widely accepted as best practice in early childhood programs” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 525). Kindergarten readiness assessments should be designed with the objective to identify weaknesses in skill sets, including literacy, for the purpose of instructional support and building background knowledge for all students.

Nutrition for Proper Development

Lack of experience is not the only factor that can negatively affect brain development and knowledge acquisition. Food insecurity is widely associated with low socioeconomic status and is inversely related with quality of life, and children who experience food insecurity are more likely to have health problems, behavioral issues, and lower academic performance (Flores & Amiri, 2019). Johnson and Markowitz (2018) stated that "even moderate nutritional deficiencies during the critical first few years of life can disrupt the development of key brain processes and structures" (p. e2). Brain structure is negatively impacted by the reduction of cortical gray matter volume growth and the reduction of myelination of neurons and brain cells when a child does not have proper nutritional intake (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018). Teachers recognize the importance of physical health. Carroll (2012) found that kindergarten teachers believe rest and proper nutrition to be a key element for school success.

Brain development is impacted by early experiences, but lack of experiences and sufficient basic needs can have a negative impact on early learning and school success. Johnson and Markowitz (2018) found that "disruptions can in turn impede cognitive and self-regulatory functioning, as well as memory, attention, and behavior" (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018, p. e2). Nutritional deficiencies, including but not limited to, vitamins, protein, and iron, can lead to fatigue, cognitive impairment, and social-emotional withdrawal (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018). Thus, children who experience food insecurity are less likely to be successful in a school setting noting that poor nutrition negatively impacts cognitive, social-emotional, and self-regulatory aspects of development. Additionally, families who experience food insecurity are more likely to

live in poverty; thus, less likely to have access to appropriate and necessary EC experiences (Keith-Jennings, Llobrera, & Dean, 2019).

Definition of Perception

The term 'perception' has a variety of meanings. McDonald (2012) stated that "perception involves how we see the world" (p. 3), and that it is an experience that is individualized based on prior knowledge, sociocultural background, and instilled beliefs and attitudes. Some experts study perceptions from a philosophical perspective, and "ask whether a real, physical world exists independently of human experience and, if so, how its properties can be learned and how the truth or accuracy of that experience can be determined" (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.); thus, a perception is only true based on a person's experiences and will not be the same for everyone. Educational professionals do this within classrooms and with regards to student achievement. In educational settings, teachers create their own perceptions on readiness based on their prior knowledge and expectations of incoming kindergarten students.

Teacher Perceptions and How They Affect Student Learning

Research has shown that teachers' perceptions play a critical role in what students achieve within a classroom. Teacher perceptions influence instructional decisions, as well as how teachers adapt to the differing needs of students (Rubie-Davis, 2006; Rubie-Davis, 2007; Tandler & Dalbert, 2020). Stormont et al. (2015) found that "further compounding children's problems, especially at-risk students, kindergarten teachers may believe that children should have already learned many essential skills prior to entering kindergarten" (p. 213).

During EC, it is developmentally appropriate for children to play, and then play is used as an instructional methodology (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). However, play as a learning tool is widely absent from elementary educators' certification courses, while it is part of the methodology in EC certification courses (National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, 2009). Since EC teacher candidates are trained to utilize play as an acceptable and appropriate instructional strategy, up through third grade, and elementary teacher candidates do not focus on play as an instructional strategy, there is a distinct difference in how an EC certified teacher would approach kindergarten students as opposed to an elementary certified teacher in a kindergarten classroom (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Pyle, Prioletta, and Poliszczuk (2018) found that "how teachers perceive play will impact how they will implement it" (p. 119). Thus, a kindergarten teacher's perceptions can influence how they teach and receive kindergarten student into the school. The type of teacher preparation that an educator receives will affect the educator's perceptions.

Importance of High Expectations and Appropriate Learning Standards

Teachers at all levels use standards and objectives to move students towards mastery of skills that will help them succeed in later schooling. Pre-K teachers utilize standards and objectives from the state education departments, and they also take guidance from the NAEYC, which, as previously mentioned, is the leading organization in ECE. NAEYC (2020) described that all states have unique and varying early learning standards, indicating that there is not a universal agreement of what young children knowledge and skill sets. Teachers use these standards to "balance what children need to learn with their knowledge of how children learn best" (NAEYC, 2020, para. 8).

However, pre-k and kindergarten standards are not always aligned, which could be problematic for vertical curriculum mapping between pre-k and kindergarten classrooms. Miller (2015) stated that it is crucial for educational systems to establish "continuity between preschool and kindergarten settings related to curricular decisions and pedagogical delivery" (p. 214).

Some research has "suggested that stakeholders hold inconsistent beliefs about what constitutes kindergarten readiness, with this disagreement having negative implications for young children" (Sultzkey & DeBruin-Parecki, 2018, p. 4). Stakeholders including policy makers, district administrators, and parents represent groups with uninformed beliefs about kindergarten readiness. Additionally, teacher perceptions regarding kindergarten students' incoming skills set can impact teachers' efficacy in kindergarten classrooms.

Kindergarten Readiness and Its Importance to Education

Although pre-k enrollment is growing, children continue to enter kindergarten not ready for the rigor and expectations required in elementary school (Pianta et al., 2020). The continued trend of children not meeting the qualifications of kindergarten readiness while more children are accessing pre-k programs has created apprehension in the educational system. Bell (2013) stated, "quality preschool programs should provide students with the experiences that they would not normally have without preschool" (p. 3). These experiences should support development, which should lead to skill acquisition. However, there is research to illustrate a disconnect between the instructional practices in pre-k, which focus on play-based learning, and the instructional practices in kindergarten, which have a growing focus on academic performance

(Hustedt, et al., 2018). Thus, there is no measure to determine kindergarten readiness, as all development happens within a different period and at a different rate for each child.

Janus and Offord (2007) stated "there appears to be a consensus among educational and developmental experts that school readiness should be understood as not merely cognitive skills, but rather as a holistic concept involving several developmental areas, such as cognitive, social-emotional, and physical" (p. 4). Thus, there is a severe disconnect. Pre-k teachers' perceptions of what students should know leaving pre-k was distinctly different than what kindergarten teachers' perceptions about kindergarten readiness and what 5-year-old students should know coming into formal elementary education.

Skill based kindergarten readiness assessments are fundamentally not appropriate for ECE (Regenstein, et al., 2018). Kindergarten readiness cannot be determined by a quick assessment and should be thought about in terms of what students can do in the classroom. Rather, kindergarten readiness assessments should mirror EC development patterns with tools that assess multiple developmental areas. The "Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP) is a school readiness tool that assesses children's readiness according to areas of physical, health, social-emotional, and overall knowledge. This takes places within the classroom over time" (Stormont et al., 2015, p. 215).

The purpose of kindergarten readiness is most meaningful when the data is utilized to guide teacher instructional planning. Regenstein et al. (2018) stated that "because it is so difficult for schools to help students catch up when they fall behind grade-level expectations, school, districts, and states should use these assessment results to proactively address the common challenges found within groups of incoming

kindergarteners" (p. 41). In class, anecdotal readiness assessments focus on identifying children's strengths and weaknesses, with the goal to support continued development through instructional support.

The Impact of Change in ECE and Teacher Perceptions of Kindergarten Readiness

Perceptions are built upon prior knowledge and experience, and educators' perceptions will influence occurrences within a classroom (Raftopoulous, 2009). Educators build perceptions through personal school experiences, teacher preparation programs, and teaching positions. Additionally, the student expectations from state and local agencies impact teacher perceptions.

> Kindergarten students are now expected to learn content formerly taught in grades 1 and 2. As the pressure to succeed academically is imposed on children earlier than ever before, there is understandably widespread interest in assuring that children are prepared to enter the classroom environment early and thrive once there. (Miller & Kehl, 2019, p. 445)

Based on NAEYC guidelines and standards, the academic pushdown is not developmentally appropriate. Pre-k teachers are more likely to follow NAEYC practices, while kindergarten teachers are more likely to follow state and curricular standards (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). Additionally, "the gap between what [pre-k teachers] see going on in kindergarten classrooms and what they think of as effective teaching makes it difficult for them to respect kindergarten teachers' instructional decisions." (Goldstein, 2008, p.234). Kindergarten readiness is a concern because the achievement gap is identifiable at an early age.

Summary

High-quality pre-k is a proven method of intervention to combat the epidemic of kindergarten "unreadiness." Kindergarten is a part of EC developmental stages and should be governed by EC principles and developmentally appropriate practices. Young children up through age eight require instructional strategies, behavioral management models, and assessment practices based on their pedagogy and developmental level. America will continue to struggle with achievement gaps because "rather than admit the problem had more to do with inappropriate curricula, methods, and expectations than children's readiness, and bowing to pressure to raise standards, schools resorted to testing to determine who was ready for kindergarten" (Ayler, 2007, p. 2). While there may never be a consistent and cohesive definition of kindergarten readiness, all education professionals can shift focus to utilizing kindergarten readiness data to support student learning rather than label and exclude already disadvantaged students.

Chapter 3

Methods

This study's purpose was to collect perceptual data through interviews from pre-k and kindergarten teachers to understand their kindergarten readiness perceptions. In this chapter, the researcher describes the methodology of the current study, including the research design, setting, sampling procedures, and the instrument used to collect data. The researcher also details the data collection procedures, data analysis, aspects of reliability and trustworthiness, aspects of the researcher's role, and the limitations of the study. Finally, the researcher summarizes the chapter.

Research Design

The researcher designed a qualitative phenomenological study to identify the commonalities and differences in perceptions of kindergarten readiness in pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) stated that "in a phenomenological research design, the researcher is concerned with clarifying the specific and recognizing phenomena through the eyes of the participants" (p. 90). Thus, researchers utilize phenomenological research to consider a specific experience even without participating in the experience (Raftopoulos, 2009). The researcher's role is to gather data, ask open-ended questions, clarify any short or confusing answers, and analyze the data.

Setting

The current study was conducted within one Midwestern community, which houses one school district. During the 2020-2021 school year, the school district's documented student enrollment was 11,629 students, with 304 of those students enrolled

in pre-k and 811 kindergarten students were enrolled for the 2020-2021 school year (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2022). It is important to note that the school district's state does not require students to attend school until age 7, making both pre-k and kindergarten optional grade levels (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020).

Sampling Procedures

Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting participants for the study that are uniquely qualified to have expertise on a specific experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In this study, the researcher utilized heterogenous purposive sampling to choose participants. For the current study, the researcher chose five pre-k teachers and five kindergarten teachers. The study focused on a small group of teachers; thus, all the teachers were employed within the limits of the District XYZ. Participants selected was based on two criteria: their employment with District XYZ and their employment as an early childhood educator (either pre-k or kindergarten teacher). The researcher used a single-stage sampling design to select participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The district has one centralized pre-k facility, known in the study as Pre-K Center. There are three distinct pre-k programs housed within the Pre-K Center, including 11 early childhood special education classrooms, three Title I classrooms, and four tuition pre-k classrooms ([redacted], 2022). To ensure all classrooms were represented in the study, teachers were invited to participate in an approximately equal ratio.

The district has 11 elementary schools, and all kindergarten teachers from each school was invited to participate in the study. The first five teachers to respond in affirmation to participate were chosen for the study.

Instrument

In research, "qualitative researchers often use open-ended interviews" (p. 192) for the instrumentation of studies (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The researcher sought the assistance for four early childhood experts' and created a 10 question semi-structured interview. It was determined that some of the questions would require different wording for the two sub-groups. Each interview question connected to a research question. The interview questions were designed to be administered to participants in a semi-structured format, with the opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions. Although the interview consisted of 10 questions, the interviewer could ask additional clarifying and reflective questions of participants during the interview to gain deeper insight from the participants.

Questions were designed to gather additional information about past and current teaching assignments and to encourage interview participants to reflect on their perceptions and personal understanding of kindergarten readiness. In addition, participants were asked to identify their active teaching certificate and their years of experience. The structured interview questions are listed and aligned with the research questions they address below:

Introductory questions

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. How many years have you been in ECE? Please specify how many years in

pre-k or kindergarten.

3. What type of certification do you hold (EC or elementary)?

Questions related to RQ1. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness?

1. What is your definition of kindergarten readiness?
2. In your opinion, what indicates that a child is ready for school?
3. Tell me about what you know and understand about the kindergarten readiness assessment the district uses.

   Possible follow-up question: How do you use the information from the kindergarten readiness assessment?
4. How do you know that students leaving your classroom are ready for kindergarten (pre-k)? How do you know that students who enter your classroom are ready for kindergarten (kindergarten)?

Questions related to RQ2. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of early learning standards and kindergarten standards related to kindergarten readiness?

5. Tell me about the learning standards you use in relation to kindergarten readiness.

   Possible follow-up question: Do you feel that your standards are aligned with the grades above or below the grade you teach?
6. How are the learning standards helpful when you determine your teaching strategies?
7. How do the learning standards lead to students being kindergarten ready?

Questions related to RQ3. How do pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of student kindergarten readiness affect their instructional strategies?

8. How does a student's readiness level affect your teaching?
9. How do your instructional strategies change if you determine a child is not on track to be ready for kindergarten (pre-k)? How do your instructional strategies change if you determine a child is not kindergarten ready (kindergarten)?
10. What do you use to determine what to teach and how to teach it (curricula, learning standards, teaching materials, assessment data)?

    Possible follow up question: Do you think these components are developmentally appropriate?

Data Collection Procedures

Oakes (2002) stated that "an Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a committee of five or more diverse individuals who review research protocols and monitor ongoing studies to ensure the protection of human research subjects" (p. 443). Before conducting the interviews, the researcher requested and received approval from District XYZ (see Appendix A), as well as from Baker University's Institutional Review Board to conduct the stated research (see Appendix B). After the IRB approval, the researcher contacted the selected school district teachers via email, which contained a request to participate and a consent to participate section. Within the correspondence, the email recipients were informed that participation would be voluntary, anonymous, and recorded. The solicitation email also included a list of researcher credentials, explanation of the study, reason for participation selection, description of member check, description of the interview process, and participant rights (see Appendix D).

The researcher assigned each participant a unique pseudonym. All confidential information was collected by the researcher and stored, via password protection, on the researcher's computer until the study was completed. All records of the interviews were kept for three years to ensure that member checks, data analysis, and future inquiries about the research will be addressed appropriately and accurately.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

After the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews using the transcription software Trinit. The researcher checked the transcripts for accuracy, then sent them to the corresponding participants. After the researcher proofread the transcripts, they were sent to the respective participants for member checking before data analysis. During that time, each participant had the opportunity to make changes to the transcriptions before the data analysis. Once the researcher received the corrected transcripts from the participants, the researcher made appropriate changes to the transcripts. The transcriptions were then sent to the Dedoose coding analysis software, which assisted the researcher in organizing the data from the transcribed interviews.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) outlined five steps to initially organize the data:

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis
2. Read or look at all the data
3. Start coding the data
4. Generate a description and themes
5. Representing the description and themes (p. 193)

Step 1 was completed during through the transcription and member checking processes. In step 2, the researcher read through all the transcripts making notes on initial reactions. The researcher wrote notes and began an organization chart for a visual display of the information. Step 3 included the Dedoose data analysis program, and the researcher began to label the categories that were observed after the transcriptions were inputted into the software.

Next, the researcher identified themes in the data as a part of step 4. The themes were findings that were similar among a majority of the participants. Each theme contained a variety of viewpoints and perspectives from both pre-k and kindergarten teachers. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that "sophisticated qualitative studies go beyond description and theme identification and form complex theme connections" (p. 195). Finally, the researcher synthesized the information about the themes and the connections of the themes in a narrative description to complete step 5.

The researcher coded the data into different categories, including expected codes, unexpected codes, and conceptual codes. Creswell (2013) described a process of winnowing the data to break down the data into usable parts or themes. The goal was to narrow the data to between five and seven themes; thus, the researcher omitted some of the irrelevant or redundant information from the interviews.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

Throughout the study the researcher employed measures to ensure reliability. First, the researcher proofed the transcripts of the interviews to confirm the transcripts were accurate, both before and after member checking. The researcher also kept codes and code meanings organized. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated "this can be

accomplished by continually comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about the codes in their definitions" (p. 202).

The reliability of the study was maintained throughout the interviews and data analysis. During transcription, the researcher double-checked the transcripts and recordings for mistakes and then used member checking, which allowed the participants to proofread the transcripts before analysis. Amin et al. (2020) stated that member checking allows "participants the opportunity to review research work, [so] a researcher can claim that the work adequately presents own and multiple realities" (p. 1474). The researcher did not generalize any findings during the study. The phenomenological study collected data from one school district. Results were only analyzed based on the current study and the current setting, not to a larger population or setting.

The researcher ensured trustworthiness while conducting the study. The researcher designed interview questions, with the help of a panel of experts that consisted of university instructors in ECE and ECE district administrators. The researcher and the experts agreed that the interview questions were applicable, consistent, and relevant to the study's research questions. The data collection was presented clearly and concisely, and the researcher documented the research process in its entirety, including the data analysis.

Researcher's Role

When the study was conducted, the researcher in the current study brought 15 years of experience in early childhood education and additional experience teaching in pre-k and kindergarten classrooms. The researcher had spent 13 of 15 school years in low SES classrooms and worked with students classified as at risk for school failure.

Teaching experience in this setting indicates that the researcher has taught students who were not identified as ready for school. The students were mostly minority and experienced limited exposure to educational resources before school experiences.

Additionally, the researcher had participated in committee work to analyze pre-k and kindergarten standards. Since the researcher has background knowledge regarding standards aligned with both grade levels, the researcher may have been inclined to have a preconceived idea of developmentally appropriate standards and how the standards are being used within the district. The researcher acknowledged personal beliefs about the early learning standards and the kindergarten standards throughout this study's data analysis. To eliminate bias, the researcher consciously identified the potential for personal bias during each phase of the research process (Galdas, 2017). As previously stated, the researcher used reflexivity and reflections and thorough descriptions of the research process to reduce the likelihood of introducing personal bias into the analysis. A researcher utilizes reflexivity when the researcher has identified the connection between the researcher, the study, and the participants, and is continually reflecting on the connection of the three components (Barrett, Kajamaa, & Johnston, 2020).

Limitations

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) stated that "limitations are factors that may affect the interpretation of the findings or the generalizability of the results" (p. 133). The study has the following limitations:

1. The sample of participating teachers was limited to one community and may not be a true representation of the perceptions of all pre-k and kindergarten teachers.

2. Many variables that could impact the answers given by interviewed teachers during the interviews are outside of the researcher's control. These variables include, but are not limited to, the honesty of the answers from participants and the different experience levels of the participating teachers.
3. The inherent methodological flaws in qualitative studies produce limitations. Various theories or paradigms define qualitative research, and the data used to analyze information is not statistical or standardized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). "Therefore, qualitative research appears to be an overarching concept under which a variety of issues may be placed, and it has positive and negative perspectives" (Rahman, 2016, p. 104).

Summary

Chapter 3 included a discussion of the methodology of the current research study. The researcher detailed the study participants with descriptions of the setting and the study population. Additionally, the researcher documented the instrument used for data collection, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis and synthesis process. Within chapter 3, the researcher discussed the researcher's role in the study, the study's limitations, and the process to ensure reliability and trustworthiness throughout the investigation.

Chapter 4

Results

The fourth chapter contains an analysis of the results from the qualitative research study. Each of the ten questions from the interview was aligned with one of the three research questions. In planning the study, the researcher sought to interview ten teachers, with five participants working as pre-k teachers and five participants working as kindergarten teachers. While the researcher made three requests to district administration, and three solicitation emails to the pre-k and kindergarten teachers in District XYZ, only eight teachers agreed to participate in the current study. Four were pre-k teachers and four were kindergarten teachers.

The participants hold various teacher certifications (early childhood certification, both early childhood certification and elementary certification, or no certification), years of experience (ranged between six and 22 years of experience), and the types of classrooms they taught throughout their careers (either pre-k, kindergarten, or other elementary grades). All the participants in the research study were females. To protect the privacy of the teachers and the school district, the researcher did not associate any teacher with any specific or identifiable information during the data analysis and presentation of findings. To ensure anonymity for the participants, the researcher assigned a pseudonym for each participant within Chapter 4, and used pseudonyms to identify the participants as Teacher A through Teacher H. The research read an interview protocol at the beginning of each interview to ensure that the participants understood the interview process, as well their rights in relation to participation in the current study (see Appendix C).

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade Taught	Certification	Experience
Teacher A	Pre-k	Both	6 years
Teacher B	Kindergarten	Both	8 years
Teacher C	Kindergarten	Both	6 years
Teacher D	Kindergarten	Early Childhood	9 years
Teacher E	Kindergarten	Early Childhood	12 years
Teacher F	Pre-k	Both	14 years
Teacher G	Pre-k	Early Childhood	22 years
Teacher H	Pre-k	No Certification	6 years

Note. Certification types include both (early childhood and elementary teaching certification), early childhood certification only, elementary certification only, or no certification.

The interviews were conducted between February 16, 2022, and February 24, 2022. After the eight interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the interview recordings. Then, the transcriptions were sent to the respective participant for a member check to ensure accuracy in the data collected from the interviews. Once the researcher received confirmation that the transcripts were accurate, the documents were uploaded into the data analysis software, Dedoose. The researcher used the program to code the transcripts and create themes based on the collected data.

The principal investigation of the research study was to gain insight into the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness. The researcher sought to examine perceptions of pre-k and kindergarten teachers, with the objective to identify any similarities or

differences among the two sub-groups of participants. Findings 1 and 2 are discussed in alignment with the RQ1, which is in relation to teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness. Finding 3 is discussed in alignment with the RQ2, which is about learning standards in relation to kindergarten readiness. Finding 4 is discussed in alignment to the research question about instructional strategies in relation to teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness.

Finding 1: There is No Shared Definition of Kindergarten Readiness

The principal investigation of the research study centered around teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness. The participants' responses echoed previous research (Sultzkey & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019) in that every teacher described kindergarten readiness in a unique way. Both previous research and findings from the current study demonstrate that there were no two identical definitions of readiness. Additionally, the teachers had differing perceptions of what skills and knowledge indicate readiness. While there was no duplicate definition of kindergarten readiness, the teachers did all consistently say that social-emotional skills were a part of readiness. The research did findi differences among participants' responses with regard to whether academic skills were necessary for kindergarten readiness; six of the eight participants included some academic skills as a component of kindergarten readiness.

Definition of kindergarten readiness. When asked "what is your definition of kindergarten readiness," each teacher responded in a unique way. Some participants responded with a broad and non-specific definition, while others gave specific examples of what skills students should have mastered to be considered kindergarten ready. Teacher C simply stated that kindergarten readiness is "what they need to be successful

coming into kindergarten." While Teacher H described kindergarten readiness as "a huge broad spectrum because there are lots of kids that have never had any experience prior to going into kindergarten." Teacher G stated that kindergarten readiness means "having the students where they are, first of all, able to learn, able to be able to go into a new environment and be able to listen."

Multiple participants noted only social-emotional skills in their definitions of kindergarten readiness. Teacher D stated that "kindergarten readiness students coming to school with an open mind and with some basic social skills, and able to listen and follow single step directions, at least". Another participant, Teacher B, noted that "a student has the social-emotional capabilities to be in a classroom with 20 other students and they have been read to" as the definition of kindergarten readiness.

One teacher gave specific examples of academic skills that are indicative of kindergarten readiness. Teacher E, a kindergarten teacher, stated students should have "some basic knowledge of letter names, even letter sounds and some numbers. You know, counting to five or 10, being able to write their first name, at least". She then mentioned social-emotional skills, including interacting with a peer, taking turns, having a conversation, and attending to an adult for a short amount of time. Another participant noted multiple developmental areas in terms of kindergarten readiness. Teacher F, a pre-k teacher, stated that "kindergarten readiness is making sure that children are equipped social, emotionally, and academically for the kindergarten journey." No participants mentioned physical development, environmental, or family in the definitions of kindergarten readiness.

Indications of kindergarten readiness. The participants' responses showed that all eight of the participants believe that social-emotional skills are an important element of kindergarten readiness. Teacher F stated that

> socially [students] have to be able to come into school with the ability to get along with other people, control their own feelings, be able to talk to other people, both adults and children, and be able to sit and stand in line.

Other teachers mentioned both academic and social-emotional skills are indicators of kindergarten readiness. Teacher H stated that students show they are kindergarten ready "not just academically, knowing some basic things, but also there are social-emotional aspects." For Teacher C, students "should at least know some of the letters" so that they have background knowledge, but also stated that if they are "able to sit, be able to learn and be successful." The data illustrates, some participants from both pre-k and kindergarten sub-groups perceive academics as elements of kindergarten readiness.

While teachers describe kindergarten readiness indicators differently, some identical phrases appeared in multiple participants' responses. Two teachers used the phrase "ready to learn" when describing kindergarten readiness. When asked to define kindergarten readiness, Teacher A, a pre-k teacher, stated that skills children need are various social-emotional skills that she calls "ready to learn skills." A kindergarten teacher, Teacher D expanded on that definition and stated, "students coming to school with an open mind and with some basic social skills. And just being ready and willing to learn."

Maturity was also a consideration for teachers in both pre-k and kindergarten when defining kindergarten readiness. Teacher G noted both academic and social-

emotional skills, and said “I also think, though, that maturity is a part of it, too.” In addition, when noting other social-emotional skills that indicate kindergarten readiness, Teacher D stated students’ “maturity level would be a big chunk” of readiness skills. Neither teacher explained what maturity looks like in a kindergarten classroom, and the researcher did not ask to clarify the meaning and use of the word.

Teacher E was the only teacher to mention pre-k in response to kindergarten readiness. First, she informed the researcher that by the end of kindergarten students are supposed to know 26 uppercase letters, lowercase letters, and all letter sounds. She then stated “I wouldn’t say [students] would need to have all of that coming in because that is part of my job to teach them that by the end of May,” and then said, “I don’t think that [students] have to have preschool experience because I think they can be a kiddo who didn’t go to preschool and someone at home worked with them, like just reading to them.” No other teachers mentioned the importance of how students obtain previous exposure or background knowledge.

Social-emotional skills. Although every teacher had a distinct definition of kindergarten readiness, all teachers find it necessary for students to have some social-emotional skills to be ready for kindergarten. Two of eight participants identified social-emotional skills as sole kindergarten readiness skills, and six of eight participants identified both academic and social-emotional skills necessary for kindergarten readiness. There was no distinct difference between demographics and the perception of social-emotional skills as sole kindergarten readiness indicators contrasted with a combination of both academic and social-emotional skills.

One pre-k and one kindergarten teacher noted social-emotional exclusively as kindergarten readiness skills. Teacher B noted that "socially and emotionally, to me, that is the most important thing. Being ready to come into a classroom with 20 other kids and be ready to learn." She also noted "problem-solving capabilities and being kind to others" as important social-emotional skills for the kindergarten classroom. Teacher A stated "independence of routine and self-help skills" are keys to kindergarten readiness without addressing academic skills. Although both Teacher A and Teacher B have two different current teaching positions, both hold early childhood and elementary teaching certificates.

The other participants noted both academic and social-emotional skills, but none of the participants agreed on the exact number of skills necessary. Teacher E stated "13-15 sounds" would be sufficient academic skills for beginning kindergarteners to know. Another participant, Teacher F, responded that she would "like them to be able to write their name before they get to kindergarten, preferably first and last name. I'd like them to be able to count to 20. And identify numbers up to 20."

Teacher G also addressed attention and cognitive skills. She said students should "be able to attend for at least 20 minutes. I think it's important for them to have certain cognitive skills" including "count to 20, identify numbers to 20." Teacher G also identified that students should "know what letters are and identify them and their sound." In addition, she previously noted the importance of some social-emotional skills. The data collected suggests that the grade taught, nor the type of certification is indicatory of perceptions about how teachers define kindergarten readiness.

Finding 2: The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is Used for a Variety of Purposes

The interview responses that relate to teacher perceptions and the kindergarten readiness assessment align with RQ1 and teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness. After analysis, the responses demonstrated that there is no shared understanding of the purpose or use for the kindergarten readiness assessment utilized by District XYZ. Throughout the interviews, the participants referenced District XYZ's kindergarten readiness assessment. However, none of the pre-k teachers were certain of the exact objective and method of implementation of the kindergarten readiness assessment. The pre-k teacher participants gave unsure responses and included their own assumptions into responses to questions about the kindergarten readiness assessment. Similarly, kindergarten teachers gave varying responses for the implementation and the objective of the kindergarten readiness assessment.

Perceptions of the kindergarten readiness assessment. When asked to tell the researcher "About what you know and understand about the kindergarten readiness assessment" that District XYZ uses, participants noted how and when it is administered. Teacher E stated that she "administers is to all of the kids within those first few weeks of school." Multiple teachers also noted that the assessment is given individually by a teacher. Teacher B said that "these were individual. We schedule individual times for the parents to bring the kids up," while Teacher C stated that the assessments have been given at different times of the year and that "it depends on the year." None of the teachers acknowledged their preference for how and when the assessments were

administered based on their professional opinions, and the researcher did not ask about teacher preference regarding assessment administration.

The participants who were able to give specific details about the kindergarten readiness assessment were the kindergarten teachers compared to the vague and unsure responses from the pre-k teacher participants. The researcher heard responses from the pre-k teacher participants such as "I don't know that I've actually been given the assessment itself" (Teacher G), "I have the old screening" (Teacher F), and "I know very little about [the kindergarten readiness assessment]" (Teacher H). The consensus from the pre-k teachers included an admission that each did not have access to the existing and most current kindergarten readiness assessment, and that the information they were using was from previous years; thus, each teacher made assumptions about what the district was assessing when administering the kindergarten readiness assessment. While the pre-k teachers did have some understanding of the process of the assessment, their understanding was assumed information and possibly outdated. It is unknown how long the kindergarten readiness assessment has been used in District XYZ.

Both sub-groups of participants acknowledged that the assessment has been utilized in different ways in previous years. Teacher D explained that the kindergarten readiness assessment "is a good indicator of what students already know coming into kindergarten"; thus, some teachers perceive the assessment tool as a screener to gather information. Some teachers suggested that it had previously been used as a screener to help with classroom placements. However, Teacher G stated, "I'm really not sure what they're using now, but I do know that the things we reviewed last year." She mentioned that she thinks it is used to screen students and that she "thinks they check to see if they

can write their name and also identify letters" and she was not sure about the math portion of the assessment. In addition, Teacher H noted, "I like to go off of that" for final observations, referencing the kindergarten readiness assessment. All four of the pre-k teachers acknowledged that they do not know or understand the readiness assessment, its purpose, and its use.

Teacher F noted "now [the school district has] waited to screen the kids until they are actually in school a month, if I understand correctly. And I think they are able to judge some more on the social-emotional than what they used to." Teacher A was also able to identify specific skills that the assessment looks at and noted District XYZ "either recreated it from something or they just came up with it on their own." None of the participants referred to a passing score on the kindergarten readiness assessment as an indicator for kindergarten readiness. Instead, each participant used different kindergarten readiness indicators to determine readiness.

The responses indicated that there is a disconnect between the kindergarten readiness assessment, its use, and its purpose, especially for the pre-k teachers. The indication demonstrates the lack of vertical alignment among the two grade levels. None of the pre-k teacher participants had solid knowledge and understanding of the kindergarten readiness assessment.

All eight participants mentioned that the kindergarten readiness assessment is mostly academic with a minor focus on social-emotional skills, and that maybe the changes in the administration of the assessment has allowed kindergarten teachers to evaluate social-emotional development more in-depth. The responses indicated that none of the participants understood the purpose of the kindergarten readiness assessment, in its

entirety. Thus, it can be assumed that for the purposes of this study, pre-k and kindergarten teachers have unique and varied understandings of kindergarten readiness, which calls into question the effectiveness of District XYZ's kindergarten readiness assessment. It should be noted that pre-k teachers' responses indicated that they were not part of the kindergarten readiness assessment process and were not included in the creation of the assessment. Pre-k teachers expressed lack of understanding of the process, but also had strong perceptions about presumed expectations from the district and kindergarten teachers.

Finding 3: Both Pre-k and Kindergarten Teachers Perceive the Learning Standards to be Directly Related to Kindergarten Readiness

As with prior findings, the teacher participants unanimously perceived learning standards to be directly related to kindergarten readiness. The eight participants each uniquely described the relationship between kindergarten readiness and learning standards in different terms, though. Within the study, 6 of 8 teachers made direct statements that learning standards are correlated to kindergarten readiness. Additionally, both pre-k and kindergarten teachers stated that the assigned curriculum is already aligned with the respective learning standards. However, each sub-group identified different sets of learning standards, and the sets of learning standards do not align from one grade to another.

Learning standards. Both pre-k and kindergarten teacher participants identified the Missouri Learning Standards as the set of standards that drives their instruction. The pre-k teachers identified two different sets of standards, Desired Results Developmental Profile (also known as the DRDP and is an assessment tool used by the pre-k teachers in

District XYZ) outcomes and the Missouri Early Learning standards, which are state standards for children ages 3 to 5. Teacher F said, "I try to use the Missouri Early Learning Standards.", and Teacher G, another pre-k teacher, stated that she will "use, too, the Missouri Learning Standards, the new ones that came out and we look at the DRDP." Furthermore, Teacher H noted that that the pre-k teachers also use "NAEYC's standards and the DRDP."

Kindergarten teachers report that the learning standards kindergarten teachers utilize are also the Missouri Learning standards. However, the Missouri Learning Standards are different than the pre-k set of standards, and the kindergarten standards are built into the district-created curriculum and are not aligned from pre-k to kindergarten. Teacher B identified "Missouri Learning Standards" as the learning standards that she uses to plan instruction. Furthermore, Teacher C noted that the learning standards were embedded into the curriculum that all kindergarten teachers use across the district. She said, "yes, [the learning standards] are in the curriculum that they have written. They have learning standards attached to all of those." Teacher D noted that the district-provided the learning standards were used as the curriculum for her classroom. According to Teacher E, the kindergarten has a curriculum designed by "curriculum writers and they do it based on the Missouri Learning Standards" and ensure that "every kindergarten in the whole district has the same lessons for phonics, for reader's workshop, for writer's workshop, for math." Thus, both sub-groups utilize learning standards, and that the standards drive curriculum implementation.

Learning standards related to kindergarten readiness. As previously stated, all the study participants agree that learning standards are directly related to kindergarten

readiness. However, only some teachers also related the learning standards to the kindergarten readiness assessment. Pre-k teachers use learning standards as a guide to plan instruction and educational learning experiences. Teacher A, a pre-k teacher, noted that the standards help to "incorporate everything, [to get] a whole picture" of the child. Furthermore, the other pre-k teachers noted the learning standards assist in planning and making sure that all learning standards will be addressed during the school year. Teacher F stated that the learning standards could act as "a guide" for planning, while Teacher G added that the learning standards "give us expectations for our students and four ourselves, and then helping us to find ways to make that happen in our environment." Additionally, Teacher H said, "that's how I plan and do my lessons to make sure that we're staying engaged." It is important to note that not all pre-k teachers rely on the standards, and one pre-k teacher noted that the learning standards were not as important for planning as prior knowledge and assumed expectations of kindergarten readiness from administration and the kindergarten teaching staff.

Kindergarten teachers had a different understanding of the relatedness of learning standards and kindergarten readiness. Teacher C noted that the learning standards act as a "foundation" and a "good starting point" to focus on beginning of the year teaching, and that they act as a "guiding point." She also commented that "the standards might be above what they are at for the beginning" and that "if they're not ready, then I know I need to get them to that point."

Two kindergarten teachers connected learning standards directly to instruction of academic skills. Teacher B stated that "a lot of what is on the readiness assessment is our standards because identifying letter sounds and letter names are first quarter standards,

and those are on the kindergarten readiness assessment." Her statement indicates that District XYZ's kindergarten readiness assessment covers skills that kindergarten students are taught in the first quarter of kindergarten. This finding suggests that students should not be required to know something to be considered ready for kindergarten if that is what is being taught in kindergarten.

In addition, Teacher E also related the learning standards to kindergarten readiness and academic instruction. She said, "[learning standards] help kiddos get a foundation in phonics, in that phonemic awareness to just build that foundation for them to become good readers and writers, and to be prepared for what first grade and second grade and so on is throwing at them." The implication is that the learning standards are designed to teach skills for future school success without acknowledging where children are at in the kindergarten classroom and how to meet their needs in that moment. Teacher D addressed the issue and stated that learning standards "do not allow for students to catch up if they are missing social-emotional skills" and that "it's the teacher's responsibility to implement those opportunity for learning those skills."

While both sub-groups of teachers perceive learning standards to be directly connected to kindergarten readiness, pre-k teachers from this study utilize the Missouri Early Learning standards, and other sets of standards, to plan curriculum. In contrast, kindergarten teachers utilize a pre-made curriculum that is already aligned with the kindergarten state standards. It is important to note that kindergarten teacher participants acknowledged that while social-emotional skills are integral to kindergarten readiness, social-emotional skills are lacking from the kindergarten learning standards. While social-emotional skills are significant to kindergarten readiness skills, according to this

study's participants, they are missing from kindergarten learning standards. As noted by the kindergarten teacher participants, if students do not have skills required to be kindergarten ready, the learning standards do not build structures into the curriculum to support students.

Finding 4: Both Pre-k and Kindergarten Teachers Change Instructional Strategies Based on Perceptions of Students' Readiness Levels

All teachers acknowledged that their instructional strategies change in relation to perceptions of students' kindergarten readiness level. Both groups of teachers spoke of instructional strategy changes both inside and outside of the classroom. While the two sub-groups placed attention on different reasons, both pre-k and kindergarten teachers suggested that student grouping and tracking progress were necessary accommodations to implement for students they perceived to not be ready for school.

In-class support. Pre-k teachers all noted that if students are struggling to master academic skills expected for kindergarten readiness, one instructional change was to create small groupings to work more closely with the impacted students. For example, Teacher G stated if a student or students "are having really strong difficulties, I like to pull them more often when I have those moments, work one-on-one with them, to help them gain that knowledge." Teacher F also indicated that she utilized one-on-one instructional time, and that is different than typical classroom instruction. She said, "I meet with the kid one-on-one or in a group setting or have another child model things for them, give them a buddy partner." Additionally, Teacher H noted said, "I pull them more aside. Sometimes it's one-on-one and not just a small group with other peers so that we can practice on their specific learning need." Teacher A stated that if she believed a

student was not going to be kindergarten ready, she would individualize instruction to "incorporate help on those skills they aren't picking up on."

When asked how instructional strategies changed based on perceptions of student readiness level, kindergarten teachers spoke of not leaving students behind, even the children who were above learning expectations. Kindergarten teachers also included a wider range of modifications to instructional strategies. Teacher C described changes based on students' readiness level as "differentiating throughout the day." She also mentioned "small groups," "stations, including stations that are above level," and "proximity" to the teacher as methods of implementing instructional strategies to target gaps in kindergarten readiness. Similarly, Teacher D stated that she would change instructional strategies to support gaps in kindergarten readiness by:

> checking in with that student more often throughout the day. Before beginning work, breaking down the steps that they might need to follow for the assignment or completion of their work. So, I might be spending more and more time with those students who have shown that they're not exactly ready for kindergarten.

While social-emotional skills were the main concern for kindergarten readiness for both pre-k and kindergarten teachers, social-emotional instructional strategies were rarely mentioned. Interestingly, Teacher B, a kindergarten teacher, was the only teacher of the eight teacher participants to address social-emotional readiness in connection to instructional strategies. She stated, "if they don't have the social-emotional skills, then I have to stop teaching the standards for a minute and teach the child." She also noted that at the beginning of the year the majority of her instruction time is using teaching strategies to strengthen social-emotional skills among all students. It is important to note

that this change to her instructional strategies is in addition to, not part of district curriculum.

For pre-k teachers, solitary instruction was the most suggested change in instructional strategy, while kindergarten teachers indicated a larger range of changes. None of the teachers spoke of teaching different skills, differentiating, utilizing various assessment strategies, or collecting data to evaluate the student for possible special needs and more intensive accommodations and interventions.

Outside classroom support. Both sub-groups of teachers presented examples of support to intervention approaches outside of instructional strategies. Pre-k teachers recognized other educational staff and professionals as the support. Teacher A noted a recent team meeting, which included her, teacher assistants, occupational therapists, and speech therapists, to "start making a plan on what we can to really hone in on some of these certain skills." Both Teacher G and Teacher H suggested that parent support is also a strong support for ensuring kindergarten readiness. Teacher G stated, "I also like to make sure that I'm giving information to the parent to be able to work on those skills with the child." Teacher H replied that "parents are concerned their children's academics", and so she works to "just keep them engaged" by giving parents "weekly home curriculum to practice what we are doing in school."

Kindergarten teachers only cited academic support from outside individuals. Similar to pre-k teachers, Teacher E also mentioned small grouping as an instructional change. However, Teacher E described a systematic approach in a school-wide intervention program known as Response to Intervention. She said, "so if a kiddo is not retaining the information in Tier One instruction with me, then they would go to a Tier 2

reading group." This was specifically and solely for reading instruction intervention. Additionally, Teacher D noted:

> oftentimes if students are not ready for kindergarten, it is pretty clear with their behaviors. And often times, if they are not ready for kindergarten, they might display certain behaviors that end up taking up a lot of the classroom time, which affects other students from learning. And it affects me getting what I had planned for the day accomplished. We do have support from other teachers who might be pulling students out of the classroom for academic purposes. Though it is helpful, we don't really have opportunities for students to be pulled out of the classroom, just strictly to practice social skills.

Again, the finding suggests that while not developmentally appropriate for kindergarten students, academics was the primary focus within the school district at both levels. Additionally, pre-k teachers from this study are more likely than kindergarten teachers to access outside classroom support, and it could be for more than only academic support.

Academic and social-emotional based instruction. All participants, especially kindergarten teachers, noted that the curriculum drove instruction, and that instruction was mostly academic based. Pre-k teachers were more likely than kindergarten teachers to include social-emotional instruction as an element of daily instruction, as social-emotional is a component of learning standards, and thus, the pre-k curriculum. Teacher A and Teacher G noted a specific social-emotional curriculum, known as Second Steps, as a part of the complete curriculum model for the pre-k teachers. However, only one of the kindergarten teachers referred to any social-emotional curriculum or lessons, and it was from an outside resource. Teacher D stated that her school "has counselor lessons a

couple of times a month put on by the school counselor, geared towards helping students build those social skills and regulate their emotions. The learning standards that we teach in the classroom are all academic."

Kindergarten teachers mentioned a variety of methods and curricular pieces that control their daily instruction. Teacher E listed four different academic assessments, including reading records, a spelling inventory, pre-writes, and pre- and post-tests, all of which are parts of the district-wide curriculum. She said that even if they cannot do a task at the beginning of the year "it gives you information." Additionally, Teacher D noted that in addition to the curriculum and the state learning standards, she also uses the first quarter grade card to backward plan to "make sure what [she] is teaching is aligning with what [she'll] be assessing later on." Teacher C also mentioned using the first quarter assessment rubric as a part of how she plans instruction. She said, "We have a scope and sequence that we teach. And then also our grade cards determine what standards we need to be assessing on, so I'm looking at those before I teach that first quarter." Again, all the measures for instruction that the kindergarten teachers described were academic based.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the data analysis of themes from eight participant interviews. Five themes led to the four findings of the study. Overall, the findings suggest that kindergarten readiness is a complex phenomenon. Kindergarten readiness has no established definition, and it conjures different connotations for various educational professionals, which were noted as a finding of the study. Additionally, kindergarten readiness assessments are utilized but not completely understood by District

XYZ staff utilizing the evaluations. There is a consensus among all teachers that social-emotional skills are a necessary and vital part of kindergarten readiness, but that it is not addressed among standards or instructional strategies, especially in kindergarten. Findings demonstrate that the teacher participants unanimously agreed on multiple topics throughout the study.

Interestingly, the code of developmentally appropriate practices was not a theme discovered by the current study's data analysis. Findings suggest that, for the most part, teachers duplicate the school district's focus and attention on academic and content knowledge as opposed to child-driven instruction and learning opportunities. However, the findings of the current research study are unique and distinctive to this group of participants. Findings from the qualitative study should not be generalized to other teachers, school districts, or educational systems.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and Recommendations

Chapter 5 is organized into three main sections: the study summary, findings related to the literature, and conclusions. The final chapter is designed to summarize and discuss the results of the acquired data from this qualitative study. The elements of the study summary include an overview of the problem, the purpose and research questions, review of methodology, and major findings, while the findings related to the literature section stands alone. Finally, the conclusion section includes the following elements: implications for action, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Study Summary

The study summary acts as a review of the first three chapters of the research study. It is designed to reiterate the purpose of the study and provide context for the latter sections, including findings related to the literature, implications for action, recommendations for action, and concluding remarks.

Overview of the problem. While extensive research has been done over the last three decades, the American educational system still battles early achievement gap (Hartman, Winsler, & Manfra, 2017). Shapiro (2021) found that even with an increased push for ECE, a large number of students are still entering kindergarten not ready for school. This calls into question how students are prepared for kindergarten and the expectations schools have for youngest students. While researchers have conducted studies to investigate kindergarten readiness, there is limited data on the comparison of perceptions between pre-k and kindergarten teachers. In addition, the researcher analyzed the differences in learning standards that guide teaching, and the instructional

strategies teachers implement to examine if those demographic factors impact perceptions of kindergarten readiness.

Purpose statement and research questions. The purpose of this qualitative study was to use teacher perceptions to investigate the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness, with special attention on the variability in perceptions between pre-k and kindergarten teachers. The research was designed to probe teacher perceptions from different angles of kindergarten readiness that affect student success. Furthermore, the objective of the study was to determine any similarities and differences in perceptions of kindergarten readiness among pre-k and kindergarten teachers. The comparison was made to acquire more data and information to help guide future curricular alignment, and more effective early childhood educational experiences, as children transition from pre-k to kindergarten. The study was guided by three central research questions:

RQ1. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness?

RQ2. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of early learning standards and kindergarten standards related to kindergarten readiness?

RQ3. How do pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of student kindergarten readiness affect their instructional strategies?

Review of the methodology. The researcher designed a phenomenological qualitative research study to investigate pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness. Data was collected through recorded, individual video interviews via Zoom with eight teachers from one school district. Four of the participants were pre-k teachers and four were kindergarten teachers. Each participant answered 10

structured questions about their perceptions of kindergarten readiness, how learning standards relate to kindergarten readiness, and how their instructional strategies are impacted by their perceptions of students' readiness level.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and then emailed to the respective participants for member check. Once the participants approved the transcripts of the interviews, the typed transcripts were uploaded to a data analysis software called Dedoose. The researcher then created codes for data analysis of the interviews. The software assisted the researcher in finding common themes among the eight interviews. The five identified themes became the major findings found within Chapter 4.

Major findings. Results from the qualitative data analysis indicated that pre-k teacher and kindergarten teacher participants did have differing perceptions about kindergarten readiness. First, all eight teachers defined kindergarten readiness in a distinctive way. No two definitions were identical. Additionally, each teacher described different kindergarten readiness indicators that children should display to be considered ready for kindergarten. Although every teacher did report that social-emotional skills were necessary for kindergarten readiness, each teacher named different skills and varying levels of social-emotional development as a component of readiness.

While the coding showed that the teachers unanimously believed social-emotional skills were key to students being successful kindergarteners, most teachers noted that the kindergarten readiness assessment was predominately academic in nature. Additionally, each teacher had a unique description of the district's kindergarten readiness assessment, as well as the kindergarten readiness indicator that children should display. Next, the data illustrated that all participant teachers perceive that kindergarten readiness

assessments vary in use and purpose, even within sub-groups. For example, not all pre-k teachers used the kindergarten readiness assessment to plan instruction, while some teachers did, and not all kindergarten teachers used the readiness assessment data gathered for instructional purposes during the first quarter of kindergarten. Furthermore, while teachers were in the same school district, they did not have a consistent and cohesive understanding of the district's readiness assessment. A misalignment between teachers' perceptions and uses of the kindergarten assessment within the same school district, such as the one found in the current study, can create an questionable and unsupported foundation for students' school success.

Another finding indicated that teachers perceive learning standards to be connected to kindergarten readiness. However, kindergarten teachers use learning standards within the district given curriculum, while pre-k teachers use multiple sets of learning standards. The pre-k teachers assume kindergarten readiness skills are those identified on the district kindergarten readiness assessment rather than learning standards found within the curriculum, even though the data suggested the pre-k teachers were not aware of the current assessment tool.

The final theme that emerged was the perception that teaching strategies are designed and changed based upon teacher perceptions of students' readiness levels. In addition, the data suggests that teachers from both sub-groups focus more on academic skills and instruction during school day instruction than social-emotional skills and instruction. However, the finding is contradictory to what kindergarten teachers stated that they desire to see in skills of incoming kindergarteners, implying a misalignment

between the district curriculum and the kindergarten readiness assessment, and even pre-k curriculum and teaching practices.

Findings Related to the Literature

Researchers have been studying ECE for decades and have investigated topics including kindergarten readiness (Janus & Offord, 2007). Published literature on kindergarten readiness has illustrated varying results, differing opinions of definitions, and debated solutions (Cappelloni, 2010). The current study investigated kindergarten readiness by probing perceptions two sub-groups of teachers that are connected, albeit in different ways, to the topic of kindergarten readiness.

The research found that literature is related to several findings from the current study. First, previous findings suggest that kindergarten readiness is multifaceted and distinctive for each child based on previous life experiences. Regenstein et al. (2018) wrote that "young learners develop skills and abilities across all of these developmental domains in a highly interrelated manner, building confidence and expertise as new competencies are mastered" (p. 39). Teachers from both sub-groups acknowledge that not all children exhibit kindergarten readiness skills upon entering kindergarten, and that background knowledge is vital to the development of those skills and supporting the research findings regarding the varying and differing definitions of kindergarten readiness.

Historically, kindergarten readiness assessments were designed to determine the skill set that a child has acquired before entering kindergarten. Hence, that is the basis of determining if a child is kindergarten ready or not. The literature suggests that this type of assessment would look at skills "through a maturational process, with little or no

impact from the environment" (Janus & Offord, 2007, p. 2). Findings from this study indicate that the kindergarten readiness assessment used by District XYZ is consistent with the maturational process and does not clearly recognize impact of the environment or allow for social-emotional skills to figure into the picture of the whole child, as it is described by the teacher participants of this study. Research would suggest that a maturational type of assessment may not be the most accurate or developmentally appropriate kindergarten readiness assessment (Stormont, Herman, Reinke, King, & Owens, 2015).

Participants of the current study unanimously echoed the sentiment that social-emotional skills were a central component of kindergarten readiness, and that social-emotional skills were missing from the readiness assessment, learning standards, and instructional practices. The misalignment of necessary readiness skills to educational practices has also been noted in research. Literature also supports the finding that academic skills, although what educational administrators push, are not as crucial to kindergarten readiness as social-emotional skills for young children. Goldstein (2008) stated that "as another result of accountability shove down, kindergarten teachers are contending with unprecedented levels of regulation and imposition" (p. 223). This suggests that kindergarten students could have lack of self-regulation, a social-emotional skill, within the classroom if academics are the main focus in the kindergarten classroom.

Both sub-groups of teachers mentioned the academic favoring on the kindergarten readiness assessment, and pre-k teachers discussed the expectations and pressures they felt to ensure students were leaving their classrooms with academic skills, as opposed to social-emotional skills. Kindergarten teachers stated that the curriculum does not allow

for social-emotional skill development, and that teachers who want to include that must work to find the time within the school day. The literature suggests that a focus on academics is not in the best interest of young children. Perry (2019) found that "the evidence from research on self-regulation suggest it is a strong predictor of children's early adjustment to and achievement in school, but also links self-regulation to positive and negative outcomes through adolescence and adulthood" (Perry, 2019, p. 328).

The findings from this study suggest that while social-emotional skills are the teachers perceived concern for kindergarten readiness skills, the academic skills remain the educational focus for both pre-k and kindergarten teachers. The literature would suggest that the disconnect should be a concern. According to Ayler (2007), "children who had preschool experiences more academically directed earned significantly lower grades compared to children who attended child-initiated preschool classes." (p. 2). Findings from the current study include one teacher who specifically mentioned reading intervention as the only outside intervention help students could receive, while reading is not the only educational concern for students.

Furthermore, other literature asserts apprehensions of strong academic focus in ECE. Giles and Tunks (2015) stated that "there is concern that the emphasis on reading instruction in early childhood is curtailing valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts" (p. 525). Based on the data collected in the current study, teachers perceive the mastery of some social-emotional skill imperative to kindergarten readiness, though mostly absent from learning standards and instructional practices. When academics become the focus of education, there is less time to focus on

life-ready skills that enable students to think critically and apply knowledge to new situations.

Finally, the researcher found that literature also relates the finding that teachers perceive both academic and social-emotional instruction are necessary to be kindergarten ready. Based on the collected data from the current study, teacher participants perceive that academic instruction is not the only type of instruction needed, especially when essential social-emotional abilities are missing for a student's skill set repertoire. LaParo, Rimm-Kaufman, and Pianta (2006) found that "research that studies the school readiness and the quality of children's classroom experience points to the importance of classroom practices in relation to children's school performance" (p. 191). As previously stated within this study, developmentally appropriate practices for pre-k and kindergarten require a focus on both academics and social-emotional development to attain high-quality education for young students. Copple and Bredekamp (2008) suggest that it would be poor teaching practice to focus solely on social-emotional learning and neglect academic learning opportunities.

Conclusions

The data and resulting findings from teacher participant interviews created opportunities for consideration for altering some elements of ECE to safeguard developmentally appropriate education for young children. The conclusions found in this section are based on the perceptions and experiences of eight teachers in one school district, all of whom participated in this research study. The conclusion section contains three sections including implications for action, recommendations for future research, and

concluding remarks. It is a culminating feature of the final chapter, and it synthesizes how the research can impact the educational landscape in ECE.

Implications for action. Kindergarten readiness has been studies and connected to early achievement for many years (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019). The problem is compounded by the lack of continuity between pre-k learning standards and expectations and kindergarten learning standards and expectations. Many state and local school systems maintain the quandary by ignoring the need for alignment between pre-k classrooms and beginning of elementary school. However, this researcher's findings could suggest possible future solutions.

The current study provides qualitative data through documented perceptual information on two sub-groups of teachers and their views of kindergarten readiness. Based on the findings, there are multiple implications for action from different levels of leadership. First, the state of Missouri, who is responsible for creating learning standards for all ages and grades, could vertically align the learning standards beginning with pre-k (DeBruin, & Slutzky, 2016).

Since the participants unanimously stated that learning standards are directly correlated with kindergarten readiness, it would be imperative for teachers to utilize them in planning daily instruction and assessment for students, especially students identified as not ready for kindergarten success. As one pre-k teacher noted, pre-k teachers do not always use state standards to plan instruction, but rather take learning objectives and outcomes from curriculum, or the kindergarten readiness assessment, as the guide. Thus, it could be mandatory for all schools to align learning standards with curriculum and all teachers to align learning standards to instructional strategies. The misalignment between

the grade level standards at the state level causes confusion and teaching practices that are not based in a sound research base.

To alleviate the issue of misaligned standards, the state could re-evaluate all learning standards, especially the pre-k and kindergarten standards, to create a consistent set of standards across the grades. It would be important to survey pre-k and kindergarten teachers and experts to determine developmentally appropriate standards that are cohesive and allow for varying abilities in the younger grades. The group recreating the standards should use evidence-based research and expert professional organizations, such as NAEYC, to guide the new standards. High-quality classrooms would be more abundant because teachers could use the learning standards to naturally focus on skills that would prepare students and instinctively build kindergarten readiness skills.

The teacher participants' responses indicate that district administration could create cohesion between the pre-k teachers and kindergarten teachers. This alignment could create a horizontal curriculum map that is developmentally appropriate and allows for a streamlined path of learning from pre-k to kindergarten. Teachers would then know exactly what to teach and the reason for it, while focusing on what students are learning in the moment rather than what they need to know for the next school year. Additionally, both pre-k staff and kindergarten staff would be implementing developmentally appropriate practices, while including social-emotional learning standards. All staff would know how to plan for students because it would be deliberately aligned with developmentally appropriate instruction practices.

District XYZ could create a committee and host meetings with both pre-k and kindergarten representatives. Then, the committee could develop a plan for kindergarten expectations based on research and evidence-based practices for young learners. Next, the committee could utilize backward planning to create pre-k outcomes and objectives that align with kindergarten expectations for the first six weeks of school. The research findings would suggest that the district could reassess the kindergarten readiness assessment, the administration process, and the process for sharing information with the pre-k program. Numerous teacher participants from this study commented that more social-emotional skills need to be addressed as a consideration for kindergarten readiness.

In addition, all early childhood teachers, both pre-k and kindergarten teachers, should understand the purpose and the role that the kindergarten readiness assessment plays within the transition for students into elementary school. It was also evident, based on collected data, that there is a need for social-emotional instruction to be built into the implementation of the curriculum of both pre-k and kindergarten classrooms. One teacher did suggest the district adopt transitional classrooms for kindergarten students who were not kindergarten ready and may require additional social-emotional support before placement in a regular education kindergarten classroom.

Building administrators could also support strengthening the processes of kindergarten transition from pre-k to kindergarten. Principals, while they could be a part of the early childhood committee the district creates to establish a pre-k to kindergarten transition plan, could ensure that pre-k and kindergarten teachers are receiving high-quality, developmentally appropriate, and relevant professional development. When teachers are highly trained in effective, evidence-based practices, students receive a high-

quality education; thus, truly being prepared for future educational demands. In addition, the district should hire pre-k and kindergarten teachers with birth-age 8 teaching certificates that ensure young children have teachers who are qualified and know the specific pedagogy.

Recommendations for future research. Based on the findings, the researcher concluded there is still much to glean about the phenomenon of kindergarten readiness. Results from this study should not be applied or transferred to other studies, but similar research questions could be utilized to understand perceptions of different samples. The following are recommendations for future research:

1. Increase the sample size of the study sample.

The current research study had a relatively small sample size from one school district, and the results may change if the sample population is expanded. Additionally, the participants could be chosen from different cities and states to determine if the findings are similar in other parts of the country. Understanding this data could impact national ECE legislation.

2. Expand the study to include pre-k and kindergarten teachers who work outside of District XYZ's facilities but within the school district boundaries.

The current study participants were all employees of the same district. However, the school district boundaries include multiple learning facilities, including childcare centers and private schools, that employ pre-k and kindergarten teachers. By including additional teachers employed in private facilities within the school district boundaries as a part of the research, findings could lead to more insight into teacher perceptions of

kindergarten readiness by increasing the variety of demographics of the sample participants.

3. Conduct the study as a quantitative study.

The current study is qualitative but could be converted into a quantitative study or using a survey or other structured data collection instrument. A quantitative study would allow for a larger sample size and would gather numerical data that could show results as statistically significant, which could support or refute results of this qualitative study's findings. Depending on the data collection instrument, the results could be used to compare, generalize, or summarize data on a larger scale.

4. Focus research on the differences between academic driven and child-initiated pre-k and kindergarten programs.

Future research could be done to investigate the ramifications of using academic driven pre-k and kindergarten programs versus child-initiated pre-k and kindergarten programs. The findings from the current study suggested that teachers, both pre-k and kindergarten, expect social-emotional skills as a component of kindergarten readiness, but not all teachers implement developmentally appropriate social-emotional learning standards, objectives, and outcomes as a part of instructional strategies of perceived kindergarten readiness. A study devised to examine academic compared to social-emotional skill development could be important in changing how school districts and early childhood programs are designed and how they function, which could have positive impact on student educational success.

5. Include other facets, such as family's role, in research about kindergarten readiness.

NAEYC (1993) notes that "a holistic approach to the needs of children and their families that stresses collaborative planning and service integration across traditional boundaries of childcare, education, health, and social service" (p. 1). Only one pre-k teacher mentioned the role of family with respect to kindergarten readiness. However, the foremost education on ECE has stated for almost 20 years that families are significant to a child's kindergarten readiness and should be considered (NAEYC, 1993). One participant of the current study suggested including a parent survey as a part of the kindergarten readiness assessment and is a valid suggestion that could be the focus of a future research study.

Concluding remarks. Kindergarten readiness has been used as a term for assessment tools, as a description for developmental markers, and as a topic for educational research. While ECE experts use the phrase to explain the numerous facets of development at a particular time in development, school districts and education staff use the phrase, kindergarten readiness, to make educational decisions for young students. The research findings indicate that developmentally appropriate practices are crucial for high-quality and effective education in pre-k and kindergarten. Without school systems that are ready for children rather than children being ready for school, the American education system will continue to see a rise in behaviors and dysregulation in the youngest learners. When school systems place developmentally inappropriate expectations on children, it is less likely to close early achievement gaps found among children of poverty and poorly resourced schools.

To create a rich, robust, and successful early childhood experience for children that will lead to future school success, the ECE system must be reevaluated. School

leadership, at all levels, must shift thinking away from the push-down approach to education and move towards a wholistic, child-driven curriculum that allows for social-emotional practice and instruction. Beginning academic instruction earlier does not guarantee school success and it deprives students of opportunities for building specific capacities, such as self-regulation, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving. To safeguard early school experiences and children's innate excitement for learning, educational professionals must make school ready for children rather than holding an expectation of children being ready for school.

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Appendices

Appendix A: School District Approval

[redacted]

Research Checklist and Approval

Date: 1/31/2022

Submitted to: Director of Research, Evaluation & Assessment

Submitted by: Julia Legate

Research Proposal Title: Pre-K and Kindergarten Perceptions on Kindergarten Readiness

Principal Investigator(s): Julia Legate

Checklist

- ☑ Completed "Application to Conduct Research in [redacted]
- ☑ Copy of "Informed consent" letter to study population/parents
- ☐ Copies of measurement instruments
- ☑ Approval from university human subjects committee (IRB) if applicable
- ☑ Copy of your complete application package

Approval of this research is contingent on adherence to district procedures as outlined in the document entitled "Application to Conduct Research" and the information provided with the application. The district must be notified of any substantive changes to the information contained in the application. The district reserves the right to withdraw approval of research if the research is deemed to no longer be in the best interests of the Park Hill students, staff, or the district.

Research Application: ☑ Approved ☐ Denied Date: 2/3/2022

Signatures

Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment

Principal

Principal

Principal

2/3/2022

Application to Conduct Research in [redacted]

Name	Organization	Department
Julia Legate	Baker University	Educational Leadership
Address	**City**	**State** / **Zip Code**
Phone Number	**Fax Number**	**E-mail**
816-777-4884		julielegate@stu.baker.edu

I have read and understand the process of application to conduct research in the Park Hill School District. I also verify that the information provided in this application is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Signature Date

Is this study part of your work for a degree?
☑ Yes ☐ No
If Yes, complete the following:
☐ Ph.D. ☑ Ed.D. ☐ M.A./M.S
☐ Undergraduate ☐ Other
University or College Baker University
Date of IRB Approval (or date of application if pending) /
Advisor's Name Harold Frye
Advisor's Telephone Number 913-344-1220

Attach a concise, yet thorough, response to each of the following items.

1) **Title and purpose of study**
2) **Timeline**
When do you plan to start your study? What is the estimated total length of time?
3) **Benefits to the district**
How will this study benefit the [redacted]?
4) **Research Design Summary**
Give specific information on the methods to be used during the course of the study. Please include your research questions, instruments, sampling and data collection methodologies, and proposed analyses. Samples of instruments may include survey questions, observation forms, and interview questions. Finally, describe any tasks students or staff will be asked to complete. Describe procedures you will use to secure and acknowledge informed consent of all participants, including active or passive consent. If passive, please provide a rationale. Please attach copies of any letters. Outline how subjects will be identified and criteria used for recruitment, who will make the initial contact with subjects, and whether or not inducements will be used to secure participation.
5) **Assurance of anonymity of [redacted] students & staff**
How will the anonymity of [redacted] and staff be protected?
6) **Risks of the research**
List any known risks of the proposed investigation to students, staff, or the district.
7) **District involvement**
What request are you making of the [redacted] and the Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment? Specify numbers of students and staff to be involved, length of time, and time line for completion of your investigation.
8) **Funding Sources**
9) **IRB approval**
If applicable, give the date and copy of IRB approval letter, or application if IRB review is in process. [redacted] will not allow study to begin until we have an approval letter on file.

2/3/2022

Appendix B: Baker University IRB Approval

BAKER UNIVERSITY
Own Confidence

Baker University Institutional Review Board

February 14th, 2022

Dear Julia Legate and Harold Frye,

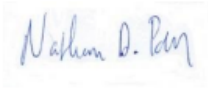
The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at npoell@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4582.

Sincerely,



Nathan Poell, MLS
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Sara Crump, PhD
Nick Harris, MS
Christa Hughes, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

First, thank you for your participation in the research study focused on teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness. The interview has ten structured questions, and I will ask follow-up questions throughout the interview to clarify answers when necessary. You will be assigned a pseudonym to provide anonymity, and the study will not contain any other identifiable information.

The interview will be recorded, and the researcher will be the only person who has access to the recording. Each recording will be transcribed within one week of the interview, and you will have the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts. Any time throughout the interview you may request to stop the interview, and you may decline to answer any questions. You may choose to remove yourself from the study at any time.

Do you have any questions before we get started**?**

Appendix D: Solicitation Email

Research Title: Pre-K Teachers and Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Kindergarten Readiness

Researcher: Julia Legate

Advisor: Dr. Harold Frye
School of Education
Baker University
8001 College Blvd.
Overland Park, KS 66210
913.344.1220
harold.frye@bakeru.edu

I am writing to request your participation in my doctoral dissertation research. My research is focused on teacher perceptions of kindergarten readiness. I have been in early childhood education for over 15 years and have I have always been interested in the transition between pre-k and kindergarten. My goal is to gain insight into differences of pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of what constitutes as readiness in young perchildren going into kindergarten.

Your participation is requested based on your teaching position within the [redacted]. The interview will take between 30-60 minutes, and will consist of 10 questions, with the possibility of follow-up questions during the interview. Each follow-up question will be used as a tool to help clarify answers and gather more in-depth information. You have the right to decline to answer any questions or follow-up questions. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will be recorded so that I can transcribe the interview. Once completed, you will have an opportunity to read the interview transcript for accuracy. The transcripts will be password protected, and only the research analyst and I will have access to the raw data. All personal and identifiable information and answers to questions will be kept confidential. Your anonymous participation is greatly appreciated and will add to the body of research shaping early childhood education.

Consent to participate

- I understand that my participation in the research study is voluntary.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and that I will have the opportunity to review and edit my answers as part of a member check.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.
- I understand that I can contact the researcher at juliamlegate@stu.baker.edu with any questions or to withdraw from the study.

I have read and understand the above statements. By signing this consent to participate, I agree to participate in the research study. The Baker University International Review

Board approved this study on February 14, 2022, which will expire on February 14, 2023, unless renewal is obtained by the review board.
Date_____

Participant Name

_____

Participant Signature _____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Introductory questions.

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. How many years have you been in ECE? Please specify how many years in pre-k or kindergarten.

3. What type of certification do you hold (EC or elementary)?

Questions related to RQ1. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of kindergarten readiness?

1. What is your definition of kindergarten readiness?

2. In your opinion, what indicates that a child is ready for school?

3. Tell me about what you know and understand about the kindergarten readiness assessment the district uses.

4. How do you know that students leaving your classroom are ready for kindergarten (pre-k). How do you know that students who enter your classroom are ready for kindergarten (kindergarten)?

Questions related to RQ2. What are pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of early learning standards and kindergarten standards related to kindergarten readiness?

5. Tell me about the learning standards you use in relation to kindergarten readiness.

6. How are the learning standards helpful when you determine your teaching strategies?

7. How do the learning standards lead to students being kindergarten ready?

Questions related to RQ3. How do pre-k and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of student kindergarten readiness affect their instructional strategies?

8. How does a student's readiness level affect your teaching?

9. How do your instructional strategies change if you determine a child is not on track to be ready for kindergarten (pre-k)? How do your instructional strategies change if you determine a child is not kindergarten ready (kindergarten)?

10. What do you use to determine what to teach and how to teach it (curricula, learning standards, teaching materials, assessment data)?

Appendix F: Coding Application


Media
Codes
transcription of interview with
transcription of interview with
Participant E interview
interview transcript with participant
interview transcript with participant
interview transcript with participant
interview transcript with participant
interview transcript with participant
Totals
Do learning standards lead/relate
No
Unsure or a little
Yes
Does students' readiness level
No
Yes
Expectations of teachers
From outside entity
From self
How do learning standards impact
How do you use the readiness
Not used
class placement
instructional planning for
How does your instructional
How/what do you assess for
What do you use to determine what
Combined
Gross motor
More academic based
More social-emotional based
Standards
What indicates readiness?
Academics
Both
Social-emotional
What is k readiness?
academics
both
social-emotional
Totals